Computer active

ISSUE 701 | 15 – 28 JANUARY 2025

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Content Director Marc Chacksfield
Group Editor Daniel Booth
Deputy Editor Robert Irvine
Production Editor Graham Brown
Art Editor Katie Peat
Contributors Keumars Afifi-Sabet, Judith Batchelor, Dinah Greek, Jonathan Parkyn, Nik Rawlinson, Andy Shaw

ADVERTISING
Advertising Manager Alexandra Thomas

MARKETING AND CIRCULATION
Subscriptions Sheri Taubes

PRODUCTION
Head of Production Stephen Catherall
Senior Production Manager Lawrence Brookes

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Chief Executive Officer **Jon Steinberg**
Non-Executive Chairman **Richard Huntingford**
Chief Financial Officer **Sharjeel Suleman**
Tel +44 (0)1225 442 244

From the Editor

I suspect that Wi-Fi routers are one of the last devices we consider replacing for a new model. There are so many phones and laptops released every month – as well as thousands of cheapish refurbished models now available – that choosing one doesn't feel especially risky. If you don't like what you bought, simply try another.

But there's a greater perceived risk that switching routers will mess up your home network, or bring little benefit at great expense. This is a shame because it's arguably the single biggest improvement you can make to your home computing.

Robert Irvine makes this point in his Cover Feature. He starts with the five most compelling reasons for upgrading, then recommends the best models for both Wi-Fi 6 and 7. More importantly, he explains which of those is right for you (and why you shouldn't bother with Wi-Fi 6E).

If I had £660 to spare, I'd buy Asus's ROG Rapture GT-BE98 router (page 56), if only to impress my kids with what Robert calls an "upside-down robot spider".

Daniel Booth
editor@computeractive.co.uk

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HOW TO USE SNIPCA URLs

We use snipcas to turn long URLs that are hard to type into ones that are short and simple. They aren't websites themselves, which means they won't be recognised if you type them into Google. Instead, you need to type them into your browser address bar, then press Enter. Doing this will take you to the correct website.

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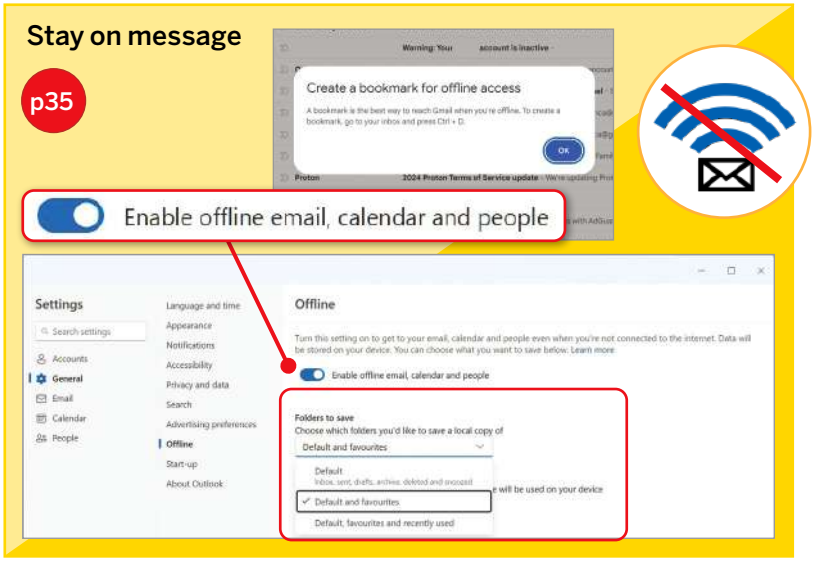


Microsoft to fix 24H2 flaw that blocks security updates

Microsoft is working on a fix for a flaw in Windows 11 24H2 that prevents some PCs from downloading security updates.

It confirmed in December that computers updated using physical media such as CDs or USB sticks between 8 October and 12 November 2024 may be unable to receive critical security patches in future, leaving them vulnerable to attacks.

Microsoft acknowledged the problem on its 'Known Issues' page (www.snipca.com/53398), explaining that affected computers "might remain in a state where they cannot accept further Windows security updates".

It advised users planning to install 24H2 via a disc or stick to instead download it from its website.

To do so, visit www.snipca.com/53397 then click the Download Now button under the 'Windows 11 Installation Assistant' heading (see screenshot above right).

Computers that installed 24H2 at any point using this method or through Windows Update aren't affected by the bug.

WHAT WE THINK

In terms of features, version 24H2 is the best Windows 11 update yet. But it's also had more problems than any other major update. It's likely these have deterred many people from upgrading to 11, which would explain Windows 10's recent revival (see box below). Once again we wonder whether Microsoft truly appreciates the scale of the disaster coming in October, when it axes support for one billion computers. In the meantime, we'll reveal ways to fix these 24H2 problems in our next issue – out Wednesday 29 January.

Plagued with problems

The problem is the latest of many that have plagued 24H2 since its release on 1 October.

Within a few days of the update, Microsoft said computers with Intel's Smart Sound Technology Audio Controller driver on 11th-generation Core processors were prone to crashing. It also said some PCs with Western Digital SSDs might repeatedly crash.

In addition, gamers reported colours looking inaccurate after installing 24H2. Microsoft admitted this flaw affected computers with AutoHDR turned on. This feature expands the colour range of games and makes them brighter.

Microsoft advised users to turn off AutoHDR for all or individual games in the Graphics section of Settings.

Other problems Microsoft has admitted include not being able to change the time zone on your computer; Disk Cleanup reporting the wrong amount of space available to be removed; and the built-in camera not working when you have object- or face-detection features enabled.

The company has released several updates to fix some of these problems, but many remain.

Other bugs users have reported include the mouse cursor vanishing in browsers when trying to type text into a box, and computers not appearing in network lists, meaning you can't share files and printers between them.

Have you suffered from any of these problems? Let us know: letters@comuteractive.co.uk

WINDOWS 11 USE FALLS FOR SECOND SUCCESSIVE MONTH

The proportion of Windows computers running Windows 11 has fallen for the second successive month, having risen for most of 2024.

It peaked in October at 35.58 per cent, but fell to 34.94 per cent the following month, then 34.14 in December.

The figures, from industry analysts StatCounter (www.snipca.com/53400), show that Windows 10's market share rose during the same period from 60.95 to 62.70 per cent. This followed six months of consecutive decline where Windows 10 fell from nearly 70 per cent.

It suggests Windows 10 is being used on roughly one billion of the world's estimated 1.6 billion Windows computers, even though Microsoft plans to end support in October.

Despite Windows 11's recent fall, it's still considerably more popular than a year ago, when it was running on 26.54 per cent of computers.

You'll like this...
Windows PowerToys Run is getting a "major refresh" in 2025 (www.snipca.com/53373)

but not this...
Scammers have stolen £100m from the NHS in past five years (www.snipca.com/53404)

Marx Bros, Mickey Mouse and Popeye all enter public domain

Early appearances by the Marx Brothers, Mickey Mouse and Popeye are now available to download from the Internet Archive.

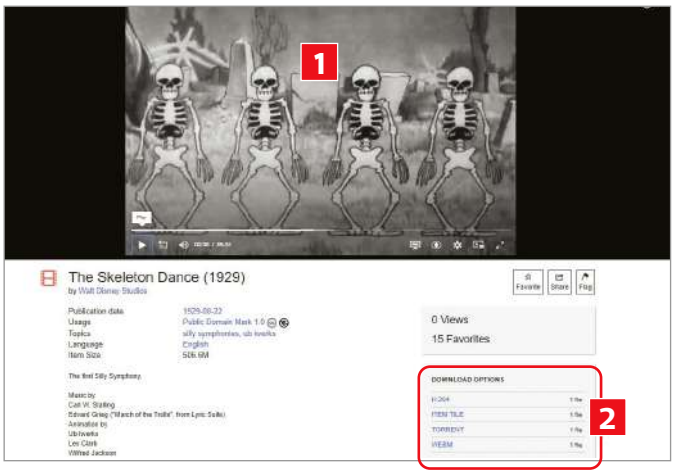
They're among the videos, songs and books published in 1929 that entered the public domain on 1 January.

This means they're out of copyright and free to download without permission or any need to pay royalties.

One of the most significant is Disney's first 'Silly Symphony' cartoon, *The Skeleton Dance* (1 in screenshot). It was one of the first cartoons to be fully synchronised with sound.

Also available is Mickey Mouse's debut as a talking character, in the cartoon *The Karnival Kid*, while he wears gloves for the first time in *The Opry House*.

The first comic strips featuring Popeye are free to download, as is *The Cocoanuts* (pictured below), in which the Marx Brothers made their film debut.



Other notable releases include Alfred Hitchcock's first sound film *Blackmail*,

the musical *The Hollywood Revue* – featuring *Singin' in the Rain* – and the books *A Farewell to Arms* by Ernest Hemingway and *The Seven Dials Mystery* by Agatha Christie.

For links to these and more releases read the Internet Archive's blog: www.snipca.com/53382. You'll find download options for each item on the right of its page 2.

Nearly a third of UK adults don't know how to wipe old data

Almost a third of adults in the UK don't know how to erase data from old devices, according to research from the data watchdog.

A survey from the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) found that 29 per cent of people are unable to wipe files, photos and videos from phones and computers they no longer use.

Three-quarters of people have kept at least one old device, with a fifth saying they did so because they were worried about their personal information being accessed.

It published the survey to emphasise the importance of deleting personal data from devices replaced by newer versions at Christmas.

More than two-thirds of UK adults (71 per cent) agree that erasing personal information is important, but 24 per cent think it's too difficult.

Most people (84 per cent) say they would try to wipe personal files before disposing of a device. Young people are the least concerned, with 14 per cent of those aged 18-34 saying they wouldn't bother, compared with only four per cent of over-55s.

Suzanne Gordon, the ICO's Director of Public Advice and Data Protection Complaints, said: "Erasing your personal information from an old device doesn't need to be difficult, and it means that your data can't be accessed by anybody else, either by mistake or for malicious purposes such as fraud."

For the ICO's advice on wiping data visit www.snipca.com/53379.

How do you wipe data from old devices? Let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

IN BRIEF

FIRST COPILOT+ MINI PC LAUNCHED

Asus has released the first mini PC that meets Microsoft's Copilot+ requirements, which means it'll run AI tasks smoothly. The NUC 14 Pro AI (pictured below) is powered by an Intel Core Ultra 9 processor, and measures 34x130x130mm (HxWxD). Prices haven't been announced, but they're likely to be at the top end of the mini-PC range. Visit Asus's site for details: www.snipca.com/53374.

PLUSNET AXES STATIC IP ADDRESSES

Plusnet axed static IP addresses for new customers just before Christmas, though the company says existing customers will still have access to them "for the foreseeable future", priced £5. Read how Plusnet subscribers reacted at www.snipca.com/53375.

TOMORROW'S WORLD

EngineAI, the Chinese makers of the new PM01 robot, are proud of its "owl-like" waist that can rotate 320 degrees. We're more impressed by how it can stand upright from lying flat on its back, bending its spine at an angle that would make our coccyx pop. Watch at www.snipca.com/53376.

IN BRIEF

EXTEND AIRTAGS BATTERY TO 10 YEARS

A new gadget called the TimeCapsule claims to extend Apple's AirTags battery from one year to 10. Made by US firm Elevation Lab, it works by replacing the standard CR2032 cell battery in the AirTags with two AA batteries (pictured below). It costs $19.99 (£16) and is listed on Amazon UK, though was unavailable at the time of writing this: www.snipca.com/53368.

MORE AMAZON TVs WORK WITH HEARING AIDS

Amazon is adding support for ASHA hearing aids to more of its Fire TVs, including the Omni Mini-LED and Omni QLED ranges. The former will also get Dual Audio, which lets viewers stream shows to their ASHA devices while others listen through the TV's speakers. Read more at www.snipca.com/53370.

THE WORLD'S GONE MAD!

This is Jeran Campanella, whose belief that the Earth is flat took him to Antarctica in December. He was hoping to record the Sun setting, but – surprise, surprise – it stayed in the sky for 24 hours, thus proving our planet is round. He admitted he was flat wrong, probably to the dismay of the 164,000 subscribers to his channel: www.snipca.com/53372.

US Government 'might ban TP-Link routers' over hack risk

The US government is considering a ban of TP-Link routers over concerns they pose a risk to national security. Investigations by three US Departments – Justice, Commerce and Defense – are ongoing, sources told the *Wall Street Journal*.

At least one office within the Commerce Department has requested documents from the company, the newspaper reported.

TP-Link, which is based in China, has grown to supply over 300 US internet service providers with routers. Its products are used by several US government agencies, including the Department of Defense and Nasa.

It's also one of the biggest router manufacturers in the UK, competing with the likes of Asus, D-Link, Linksys and Netgear.

One source said the routers typically come with security flaws, which the company resists fixing when told about them.

The investigation follows a Microsoft report in October revealing that a botnet of hacked TP-Link routers was used to steal passwords in a brute-force attack.

In August, the House Select Committee on the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) urged an investigation into the company. It warned that the ability of the Chinese government to carry out cyber-attacks using routers like TP-Link's is "significantly alarming".

TP-Link has denied any connection with the CCP and said there's "no evidence to suggest our products are more vulnerable than those of other brands".

The National Cyber Security Centre hasn't commented on the risk in the UK.

WHAT WE THINK

This story may have been leaked to the press to force TP-Link to take its security flaws more seriously. We hope it does the job because the company makes outstanding routers that we want to keep using and reviewing. As it stands, we don't think there's an urgent risk to UK consumers, so we're happy to recommend the routers in our Cover Feature (see page 50). We'll let you know if this changes.

Interpol: stop calling dating fraud 'pig butchering'

Interpol has called for the media to stop referring to online dating and investment fraud as 'pig butchering' because it "dehumanizes and shames victims".

The term comes from the scammer's tactic of 'fattening up' the victim, much like preparing a pig for slaughter. They spend weeks or even months talking to the victim by email or on dating apps and social media.

Once they've gained their victim's trust they try to con them into paying money into fake investment schemes, often involving cryptocurrency.

Interpol says the term 'romance baiting' should be adopted when describing fraud that takes place through dating apps. It said this phrase is already being used by law-enforcement agencies and online safety experts.

It said that this "places the spotlight squarely where it belongs: on the actions of the perpetrators, rather than those of the victims"

(www.snipca.com/53367).

Cyril Gout, Interpol's acting executive director of police services, said: "Words matter. We've seen this in the areas of violent sexual offences, domestic abuse, and online child exploitation. We need to recognize that our words also matter to the victims of fraud."

Google suggests ways to fix its search monopoly

Google has said that tech companies like Apple and Mozilla should be able to offer several different search engines across their browsers and devices, giving users more choice than using only Google's search tool.

The proposal is in response to the US Department of Justice saying in November that Google must sell Chrome in order to break the company's monopoly in online search.

Google's search engine accounts for about 90 per cent of all online searches globally.

Government lawyers said that Google's ownership of Chrome – along with the Android operating system for phones and tablets – allows it to guide users towards its own search engine, without giving them the choice of others.

They claim Google broke the law by paying billions to manufacturers like Apple and Samsung to ensure its search engine was the default on their devices.

Google slammed the ruling as a "radical interventionist agenda" that would "break a range of Google products – even beyond Search – that people love and find helpful in their everyday lives".

However, the company was always likely to counter with its own proposals in a bid to reach a compromise.

In a blog post (www.snipca.com/53361), Google's VP of regulatory affairs Lee-Anne Mulholland wrote that browser companies like Apple and Mozilla will "continue to offer Google Search to their users and earn revenue from that partnership" while allowing them to have "multiple default agreements across different platforms (eg, a different default search engine for iPhones and iPads) and browsing modes".

Google also said that browsers should be able to change their default search engine every 12 months.

It plans to appeal the ruling ahead of a hearing in April, and will submit a full revised proposal on 7 March.

Journalists to Apple: scrap AI tool that creates fake news

BBC News
2h ago
Luigi Mangione shoots himself; Syrian mother hopes Assad pays the price; South Korea police raid Yoon Suk Yeol's office.

An international journalist body has called on Apple to remove its new AI tool after it created a false headline claiming murder suspect Luigi Mangione had shot himself.

Mangione was arrested following the murder of healthcare insurance CEO Brian Thompson in New York in December. Apple Intelligence, launched in December, summarised a BBC news story with the false headline 'Luigi Mangione shoots himself' (pictured).

The BBC complained to Apple, claiming its news service "is the most trusted news media in the world". Apple has yet to comment.

"It is essential to us that our audiences can trust any information or journalism published in our name and that includes notifications," the BBC added.

Now Reporters Without Borders, a Paris-based group that defends press freedom and supports journalists, called on Apple to scrap its tool.

Vincent Berthier, head of the organisation's technology and journalism desk, said: "The automated production of false information attributed to a media outlet is a blow to the outlet's credibility and a danger to the public's right to reliable information on current affairs (www.snipca.com/53358)."

He added that AI tools can't decide facts because they work with probabilities, not truth.

Apple's tool also inaccurately summarised a story in November claiming Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu had been arrested.

As well as summarise news, Apple Intelligence creates text and images based on your instructions – see www.snipca.com/53359 and page 45.

IN BRIEF

PRESS BUTTON TO SKIP SKY TV ADVERTS

Sky Glass and Stream viewers who pay to skip adverts can now do so by pressing a 'Skip ads' button that appears on screen. Previously, they could only fast-forward them. However, it works only for Sky's own channels, not on other apps. It's part of an update that also adds Apple AirPlay support, letting you stream from your Apple devices to a Glass TV. For info on skipping ads visit www.snipca.com/53357.

APPLE ADDS 360-DEGREE VIEWS TO MAPS

You can now use Look Around on the online version of Apple Maps, letting you explore cities in 360 degrees – like Street View in Google Maps. Currently, it works only for Edinburgh and London in the UK, though it's available for other major cities around the world (see www.snipca.com/53364). Zoom into a map then click the binoculars icon (see screenshot).

PAY MORE FOR ADOBE PHOTOGRAPHY PLAN

The monthly cost of Adobe's 20GB Photography plan, which includes Photoshop, Lightroom and Lightroom Classic, will rise from $9.99 to $14.99 (about £11.90) on 15 January. Existing subscribers can avoid the increase by switching to the $120 (£95) annual plan. The 1TB stays the same at $19.99 a month or $239.88 a year (£15.90/£190). Read more at www.snipca.com/53355.

By how much will your broadband bills rise in 2025?

New Ofcom rules simplify increases but you might still get a shock

Answering this question in recent years meant waiting for the latest inflation rate to be announced. Internet and mobile providers used this as the base for increasing their prices, and then added their own figure – usually 3.9 per cent. In 2022 and 2023, as inflation soared, customers were clobbered with the biggest increases ever – over 14 per cent at their peak.

This will end in 2025 as Ofcom's ban on inflation-linked price hikes comes into effect. All contracts signed after 17 January must state future increases in "pounds and pence" to give customers a clearer idea of how much extra they'll be paying.

THE FACTS

- Ofcom has banned mid-contract price hikes that are linked to inflation, following large increases recently
- Most providers have responded by announcing flat-rate increases in 'pounds and pence', with £3 a month being the most common increase
- In percentage terms this could lead to bigger increases for many customers than linking to inflation

> "Ofcom's changes are meant to make price rises easier to understand, not to reduce them"

Many consumer campaigners applauded this move when Ofcom announced it last year, but some industry analysts pointed out that come April 2025 it would actually lead to higher percentage increases for many customers. And that's precisely what will happen.

The most influential provider is BT. It was the first to respond to Ofcom's ban, saying in January 2024 it would increase mobile (EE) and broadband prices by £1.50 and £3 respectively. That set the benchmark, and TalkTalk and Vodafone soon followed with the same increase. Virgin Media O2 waited until November to confirm its increase, raising prices by £3.50 (broadband) and £1.80 (mobile).

Sky has always been the odd one out. It has never linked rises to inflation, sticking with fixed-price increases. In recent years of high inflation that led to increases lower than the industry average.

Last year, for example, Sky raised prices by 6.7 per cent – below BT (7.9 per cent), TalkTalk (7.7 per cent), Vodafone (7.9 per cent) and Virgin Media (8.8 per cent). Virgin's increase was always larger because it used the RPI rate of inflation (rather than CPI), which is usually higher.

Sky hasn't announced its price increase for 2025, but it will still have to follow Ofcom's rules because they also ban increasing prices by percentages, whether or not linked to inflation.

The new flat-rate increases make it much easier to work out what you'll be paying. You no longer have to find out the rate of inflation, add it to your provider's basic increase, then remember what you're currently paying to work out a percentage.

But calculating this will tell you whether you'll pay more in 2025 than you would have under the old pricing policies. We don't yet know December's inflation rate, but in November it was 2.6 per cent. Adding this to 3.9 per cent gives us 6.5 per cent.

Applying that overall increase to the UK's average broadband bill of £30 takes it to £31.95 – less than the £33 you'll pay once the new flat-rate increase is added. But by contrast a £3 increase in 2023 would have seen prices rise by less than that year's 14.4 per cent inflation-linked increase.

Whether you face bigger percentage increases is down to how much you currently pay. The lower your bills, the higher percentage a flat rate of £3/£1.50 will be. Some customers on cheap mobile contracts face a double-digit increase – over 40 per cent in the case of one reader (see page 13).

Also, as with most industry regulation, there will be unintended consequences. Don't be surprised if providers compensate for lost revenue by increasing prices of extra features that fall outside your main contract.

Remember though that Ofcom's changes are meant to make price rises easier to understand, not to reduce them. Firms are still allowed to increase prices during your contract as long as these are explained in pounds and pence.

This angers customers just as much as the size of the increase itself. Calls to ban this next are sure to intensify in 2025.

Protect your tech

Scams and threats to avoid, plus new security tools

WATCH OUT FOR...

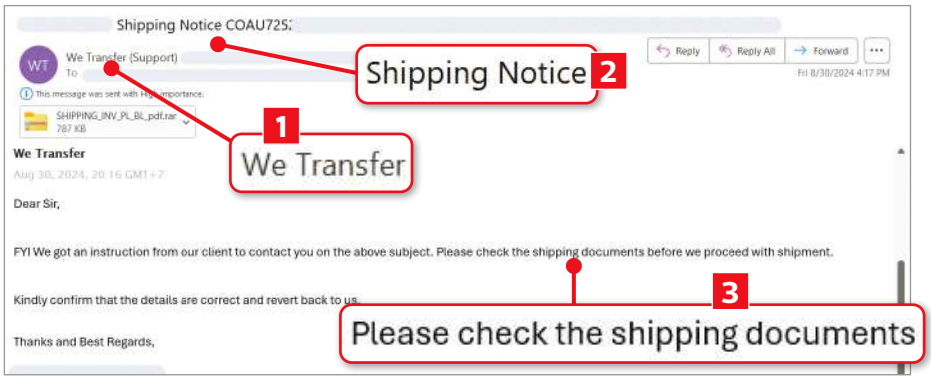
Malware hidden in 'concatenated' ZIP files

What's the threat?

Scammers are delivering malware by hiding it inside ZIP files emailed as attachments. They're using a technique called 'concatenation', in which they combine two ZIP files into a single archive. One contains malware, while the other is harmless content. This makes it difficult for software to detect and block the threat.

The attack was detected by cybersecurity firm Perception Point, which spotted malcious ZIPs attached to emails as a seemingly harmless RAR file. It said that whether the malware infects your PC partly depends on which software you use to open it. 7Zip, for example, shows only the safe part of the archive, leaving the malware undetected and free to infect your computer. However, opening the files with WinRAR can expose the malware.

Windows File Explorer, meanwhile, either opens the file or reveals only part of it, depending on how the attackers built the specific file that you receive.


Shipping Notice COAU725:
We Transfer (Support)
Shipping Notice 2
1
We Transfer
Dear Sir,
FYI We got an instruction from our client to contact you on the above subject. Please check the shipping documents before we proceed with shipment.
Kindly confirm that the details are correct and revert back to us.
Thanks and Best Regards,
3
Please check the shipping documents

Perception Point said the scammers claim the files come from WeTransfer (1 in our screenshot) and use the subject line 'Shipping Notice' 2 to suggest it's an important email from a courier about a delivery. It says you need to read the "shipping documents" in the files before the "shipment" can proceed 3.

How can you stay safe?

The usual advice applies – never open an attachment you weren't expecting. Note that this scam uses 'We Transfer', while the real name is WeTransfer (no space). Clicking a legitimate link will take you to https://wetransfer.com.

Couriers do send genuine emails, but make sure they have tracking numbers that you can verify on their site. Also, if you use 7Zip, consider switching to WinRAR to stay safe from this particular threat.

New tools | Acronis True Image for Windows 11

Acronis has updated its True Image backup and cloning software to work with Windows 11 version 24H2, which is the latest build of the operating system.

True Image 41736, released on 16 December, contains security and bug fixes, as well as error messages that are easier to understand (see www.snipca.com/53277).

This will please both Windows 11 Home and Pro users, though only the latter will benefit from True Image being updated to work with the latest version of BitLocker. This is vital because it means True Image will securely back up systems that have been encrypted with BitLocker.

It comes a few weeks after Microsoft started to make 24H2 available to more computers (see Issue 699, page 6). The subscription version of True Image updates itself automatically, but if you bought the program as a one-off purchase you'll have to update it yourself in the settings. If you don't have the program you can buy it at the discounted price of £24.99 from the *Computeractive* Software Store: www.snipca.com/53278.

ScamWatch
Readers warn readers

Netflix payment 'failed'

I'm a Netflix subscriber, though given the amount of dross on it I might not be for much longer. Anyway, I received a text message saying my account had been suspended because a payment had "failed". I knew this wasn't true because I was actually watching Netflix at the time the message popped up on my phone! I was supposed to tap a link to update my payment information, but I was never going to fall for that old con. I checked my bank account for good measure and saw that all my payments were up to date. Here's what the text message looks like: www.snipca.com/53138.

John Coles

Warn your fellow readers about scams at letters@computeractive.co.uk

Letters

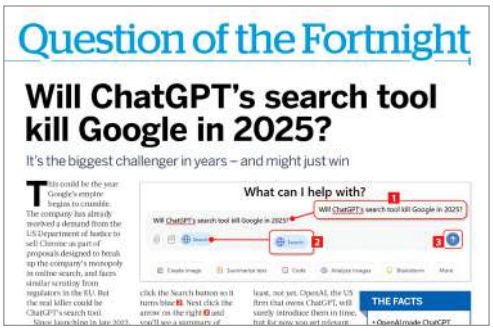
Tell us what's on your mind

Google will launch a rival to ChatGPT

I've been extremely impressed by ChatGPT search and agree that it's the biggest challenger to Google for years ('Question of the Fortnight', Issue 700, pictured right). I love how you can 'talk' with it to get what feels like human responses.

But what you don't speculate on is how Google will respond to the threat posed by ChatGPT. It seems obvious to me that it will have to launch its own chat-based search tool to compete. The 'AI overview' results that Google gives currently are useless compared with the question-and-answer method offered by ChatGPT. This is the future of search, not typing something into Google and scrolling for ages looking for a relevant website.

John Seymour


Question of the Fortnight

Will ChatGPT's search tool kill Google in 2025?

It's the biggest challenger in years – and might just win

We don't need Windows 11 Lite

I understand Peter Starkey's frustration with Microsoft claiming that TPM 2.0 is a "non-negotiable" part of modern computing (Star Letter, Issue 700), but I disagree that the company should make a 'Lite' version of Windows 11. Microsoft is already addicted to releasing multiple versions of its tools, often with confusing names that don't really explain what makes them different to the standard edition. Outlook is the obvious example. I could try to list all the different versions, but I don't want to lose the will to live.

A 'Lite' version of Windows 11 for computers that can't upgrade to the full operating system is a messy compromise. It might give the wrong impression to people running Windows 10 that they're upgrading to a more advanced system. I still think Microsoft will buckle under mounting pressure and prolong support for Windows 10.

Scott Reed

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Why I never use the Start menu

I share your distaste for Microsoft cluttering the Start menu with 'recommended' tools and websites that are little more than adverts (see Issue 700, page 6), but I don't understand why anyone uses the Start menu at all. It's always seemed redundant to me. I can't help but wonder why so many people still rely on it when there are faster, simpler ways to get things done.

Everything I need is already at my fingertips without it. I've pinned all my most-used programs to the taskbar, created desktop shortcuts for the rest, and set up several keyboard shortcuts to open my favourite apps and folders.

If I need to search a file I press Windows key+E and start typing in File Explorer. If I need to open an app or find a program's files, I type into Windows' search bar or the Run command box. I press Alt+F4 to turn off my PC rather then opening the Start menu.

Whenever I do open the Start menu, normally as the result of a clumsy click, it feels chaotic. It's just too distracting. It's like going to a library to study and finding yourself surrounded by flashing neon signs and people handing out flyers for things you're not interested in. It seems like a relic from when computers were simpler, and we all needed a big signpost saying, 'Start here!'.

Joe Stephens

My internet goes down at 2.47am every night

My advice to anyone thinking of switching to full-fibre broadband is to only do so if you're unhappy with your speed. Otherwise, leave it until the copper cables are shut off and you have no choice.

I rang my ISP (BT) at the end of October to renew my contract, and to haggle for a new one. I was offered £13 off, which I accepted.

The lady in the call centre then mentioned upgrading to full-fibre. I told her my circumstances were difficult because the wire comes from the pole to the corner of the house, then goes around the back and in through the wall into our airing cupboard and down into the middle room of the house.

The lady said this was no problem because the engineers would run the new cable from the pole to the corner of our house and test the wiring. So I agreed to a new two-year contract. How wrong I was! The engineer (a contractor, not Openreach) drilled a hole through into the front living-room wall nearest to the pole. He then ran the new wire through and placed a small box on the wall behind the TV, then placed the router and phone nearby.

He then placed a relay disc next to the computer in my middle room. I now have two extra plugs connected to my mains. Every night the broadband goes down at

What's the Issue...?

I'm finally ready to ditch Chrome for Brave, so can you remind me when you ran a Cover Feature on it?

James Day

CA SAYS Yes, in Issue 686, page 50.

I recall a feature last year on fake and dangerous items you should never buy on Amazon. When was that?

Stephen Hall

CA SAYS In Issue 692, page 62.

When was your Cover Feature on free phone apps for editing photos?

Dawn Rigby

CA SAYS In Issue 689 – read it and the features above on our new 2024 Back Issue CD: www.snipca.com/53179.

2.47am for two or three hours. BT puts this down to a faulty electric socket, but researching on the internet it seems other people are affected in the same way.

Michael Kendrick

Not using Kaspersky is common sense

Several readers have written recently saying they'll continue to use Kaspersky because they think it's unfair to punish the company because of Vladimir Putin's actions. They miss the point, and it has nothing to do with Kaspersky being a private company. No company is truly 'private' in countries like Russia or China where the government has total control. It's common sense to not support companies in countries where your data can be put at risk.

David Maurice

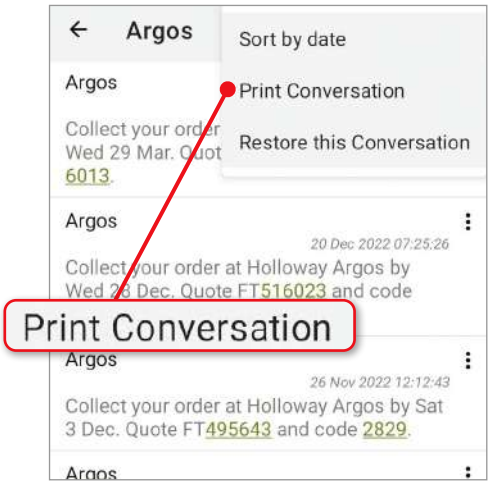
How can I print text messages?

Barely a week passes without some new innovation in technology, but are there any limits? I recently exchanged text messages on a legal matter (texting seems to have taken over from emailing for many people) and I wanted to keep a copy – either printed or a PDF.

I couldn't find a print option in my phone's menu, and searching online found various complicated methods or suggestions to take screenshots and print those. This is a reasonable option for a few short messages, but even then it's something of a workaround.

In the end I captured screenshots, but it's not satisfactory for an extended exchange where some messages take up more than a single screen. Am I missing something obvious or is this something the tech giants need to think about?

Paul Denyer



STAR LETTER

Forcing Amazon to pay 'e-waste' bills will lead to higher prices

Anyone happy about the Government's plan to make Amazon and eBay pay for recycling electronic waste should be aware that it'll lead to higher prices for goods (Issue 700, page 8). These companies will pass the cost straight on to us. This will make the bargain tech that many people on low incomes rely on more expensive.

I'm one of millions in the UK who survive on a low income and can only afford to buy cheap refurbished laptops from the big tech retailers. Even an increase of 20 per cent would mean I'd struggle to afford these, and I bet prices will go up even more as a result of these new rules.

I'm not blind to the problem of electronic waste. I'd soon start noticing if people tossed unwanted laptops over my garden fence. But a better solution is to make devices that last longer in the first place, and for manufacturers to support them for longer. Lowering VAT on repairs, or even offering tax credits for recycling, would make a genuine difference without simply driving up the cost of goods.

There should also be more emphasis on repairability. I've often reluctantly chucked away devices because they weren't flexible enough to be repaired. Apple is the biggest culprit. It thinks it makes the perfect device every time, and that the public shouldn't be allowed to tinker with them. It's an attitude of sickening arrogance.

So by all means cheer on the prospect of Amazon and eBay adding to the UK's recycling bill. But don't then moan when prices go up as a result.

Arthur Mansfied

The **Star Letter** writer wins a **Computeractive** mug!

CA SAYS **Paul's right – this is something that should be a lot easier. Robert Irvine found it just as difficult in Issue 656's Easy When You Know How column (page 74). He tried printing screenshots, but they came out ridiculously large. He had more success using the 'SMS Backup & Restore' app (www.snipca.com/45560), which copies messages to Google Drive, from where he could print his text conversation. If anyone else uses other methods, please let us know.**

My O2 bill is going up by 44%

So Richard Groom feels aggrieved that his O2 phone account is rising by (only) 26 per cent (Star Letter, Issue 699). Well, I too have an O2 account which is also rising by £1.80 in April 2025. However, I've had my O2 account since it was transferred from TalkTalk (at £2.50 a month), and my current monthly cost is £4.06. A rise of £1.80 increases what I'm paying by a staggering 44.33 per cent! It's time I looked for a new supplier.

Ray Rolt

Helicopters are Bing's Waterloo

I had to chuckle at the recent letters revealing that Bing's AI Image Creator (www.snipca.com/52985) imagines women fighting during the English Civil War and World War 1. I wanted to see what it would come up with if I typed 'British soldiers Battle of Waterloo'. The results seemed accurate enough, but then something at the corner of the image caught my eye. Now, I'm no professional historian, but I've watched enough Dan Snow and David Starkey documentaries to know that helicopters weren't used during the Napoleonic wars.

Colin Troughton

Consumeractive

We stand up for your legal rights

Can Adobe remove features from software I've paid for?

LEAD CASE

Q In 2014, I bought Adobe Lightroom photo-editing software for £71.80, but it recently removed some important features. To access these tools you now have to subscribe, even though they are some of the most important features of the program. Is Adobe allowed to do this?

David Ross

A The short answer is probably yes. When you buy software you're actually buying a perpetual licence to use it. But you don't actually *own* it. This means the developers can remove features unless they haven't stated this in their terms and conditions, and Adobe's terms do say this. The only part of the software you own is any disk it came installed on.

It's possible that a judge may decide a company has acted unfairly by removing tools too soon after releasing the software to the public, and order it to refund customers. But Adobe released the first version of Lightroom in 2007, and we think it can't be expected to maintain all its features indefinitely. Also, David has been using Lightroom for 10 years, which a judge would probably say means he's got his money's worth.

Companies are also allowed to change the availability of features so they require a paid-for subscription – though again, a judge could rule this has happened too soon after a program has been released.

Adobe has been changing its business model from perpetual licences to a subscription since announcing Creative Cloud in 2011. It released its final licence for Lightroom (version 6) in 2015, and stopped supporting it two years later. You can now only use Lightroom by subscribing. It plans to do the same for its PDF reader Acrobat in 2025.

CASE CLOSED

Is Currys in breach of its Xmas returns policy?

Q I bought a Dell computer on 17 November from Currys as a Christmas present for my son. Currys said it would take back unwanted presents until 23 January. It became faulty a few days after being opened, but when I asked Currys for a refund it asked to repair it first. Does this mean it's ignoring the Consumer Rights Act (CRA) or its Christmas refund period?

Ann Jones

A Currys isn't breaching either the CRA or its Christmas returns offer. The terms of the latter, which runs until 23 January for purchases made between 30 October and 24 December 2024, state it will only accept returns for a refund if the unwanted goods are unused, have the original packaging and can be resold as 'new'. If Ann's son has used the PC, then Currys can legitimately refuse a refund.

However, it still has to abide by the CRA. If fewer than 30 days had passed since purchase Anne could have demanded a full refund. But that deadline has passed, so Currys can attempt to repair or replace the PC, though not both. If one of these fails then Ann can insist on a refund.

CASE CLOSED

CASE UPDATE

PDF Guru refunds reader after we explain the law

PDF Guru (www.pdfguru.com) has resolved Mary Twentyman's case (see Issue 698) by giving her a full refund of £49.99 for a subscription she didn't realise she'd signed up to.

Mary thought she'd paid £1.99 last August as a one-off payment. She needed the software to access a file. But when she checked her September bank statement she saw that a year's subscription had been taken.

Her bank initially agreed to return the money as a chargeback, but stopped this when PDF Guru challenged it. Mary complained to PDF Guru, but she said it refused to listen. That's when she emailed us.

We asked PDF Guru, based in Cyprus, to reconsider her case, explaining that under the Consumer Contract Regulations she had 14 days to cancel the subscription. This applies whether you're signing up to a service for the first time or renewing a contract.

PDF Guru told us one of the reasons it hadn't responded to Mary was it couldn't track down her account. It seems she'd paid for the download with a different email address to the one she contacted the company on. Now this is resolved the company has closed her account and refunded her.

Can I get refund for ChatGPT Plus subscription?

Q I was trying to help my sister-in-law, who lives in Tunisia, pay for a $20 (£16) one-month subscription for ChatGPT Plus (www.snipca.com/53276), but instead the company took over £550 from my NatWest account. The bank won't help me get it back. Have I lost my money?

Annette Deschenes

A Hopefully not, but it might take some sorting out. It appears Annette's husband logged into his sister's paid-for ChatGPT account, then – using her card – inadvertently paid for at least two years' subscription rather than a month.

Annette said her bank has refused to help her because the payment is still pending. It told her she must contact ChatGPT's owner OpenAI to cancel the payment.

Banks will often refuse to help if a payment is still pending. The reason is because once it's listed in your account summary, it's been approved by both you and your bank. Also, the bank has no idea if you've received either goods or services already.

The main problem is that while this was an accidental purchase, it wasn't unauthorised. Another potential problem is that the money has come from an English bank account for a ChatGPT account used by a different name.

We've contacted both Annette's bank NatWest and the Financial Ombudsman for clarification on whether she can claim a refund for an accidental, rather than unauthorised, transaction. It would help if her sister-in-law doesn't use ChatGPT Plus until the matter is resolved. We've also emailed OpenAI asking it to investigate.

CASE ONGOING

My ISP isn't giving me promised speed – what should I do?

Q I signed up for broadband with Scottish company BrawBand (www.brawband.co.uk). I'm paying £36 a month for 450Mbps, but often it reaches just 148Mbps. I've contacted them, but they're not being much help. Am I getting a fair deal?

John Hyland

A It doesn't sound like it. BrawBand actually claims he could get up to 900Mbps, but "guarantees" a minimum of 450Mbps. He's clearly getting nowhere near that. The company has asked John to attach an Ethernet cable or move his router to see if they improve his speed. It also asked him to try different sites to check his speed.

If these don't work, then BrawBand would be in breach of contract by not delivering the promised speed.

What complicates things a little is that BrawBand isn't signed up to Ofcom's voluntary Broadband Speeds Code of Practice (www.snipca.com/53273). If it was, he could have asked the company to cancel his contract without a fee for leaving early. Instead, if BrawBand can't resolve this and won't let him leave, he'll have to report it to the Ombudsman Services (www.ombudsman-services.org). It belongs to this under the business name Highland Network Ltd.

CASE ONGOING

CREDIT WHERE IT'S DUE

Majority replaced whole surround-sound system

I've noticed you've started reviewing audio products from Majority, so I thought I'd tell you about my positive experiences with the company. Last August, I bought the Majority Everest surround-sound speaker system (www.snipca.com/53274, pictured), which comes with a soundbar, subwoofer and detachable speakers.

I had a few problems with the speakers. I told Majority that the sound wasn't consistent, and they promptly replaced the speakers that weren't working properly. But then the soundbar started to make strange noises. I again asked for a replacement, but this time Majority said they would send me a brand new system. This arrived within few days and has worked perfectly since.

At every stage of my query the support team were courteous and apologetic. It helps that they're based in England, near me in Cambridge as it happens. Excellent service.

Richard Groom

Has a company impressed you with its customer service? Please let us know: editor@computeractive.co.uk

Contact
Majority

- **Email** hello@majorityradios.co.uk
- **Online form** www.majority.co.uk/support

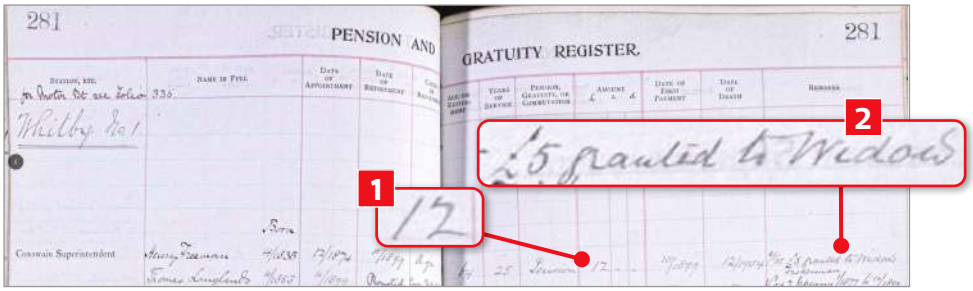
Grow Your Family Tree

If your ancestor volunteered to save lives at sea, follow **Judith Batchelor's** advice to...

Search Ancestry's new RNLI records

In celebration of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution's (RNLI) 200th anniversary, Ancestry has made records dating from 1824 to 1989 available for free at www.snipca.com/53222. Some of the most interesting records are the medals and awards given to lifeboatmen. Ancestry's medal books include the name and rank of an individual, as well as details of the incident that led to an award.

We searched for Henry George Blogg of the Cromer Lifeboat Station in Norfolk, who's the most decorated lifeboatman in RNLI history and therefore appears in many medal books and honorary presentation records. For example, he was awarded a second service clasp on his gold medal for his role as coxswain in rescuing survivors of the Dutch oil tanker Georgia on 15 December 1927 (see screenshot below).



Henry Freeman was paid a pension of £12 after retiring as Coxswain Superintendent

We also searched for Henry Freeman, a lifeboatman at the Whitby Station, North Yorkshire, who attracted fame as the only survivor of the Whitby lifeboat disaster of 9 February, 1861. Henry's pension record reveals that he was employed as the Coxswain Superintendent from December 1874 until his retirement in October 1899. He was awarded a pension of £12 (1 in our screenshot above) which was paid until his death in December 1904. His widow was granted a gratuity of £5 the following year 2.

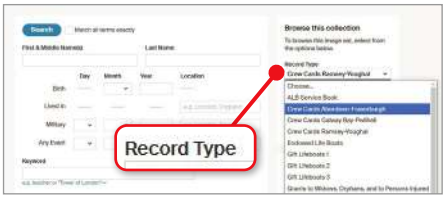
Henry George Blogg was honoured for rescuing survivors of the Dutch oil tanker Georgia in 1927

Browse record books and RNLI memorial

You can also look through records without searching for individuals. Click 'Record type' on the right in the 'Browse this collection' section (see screenshot below), then scroll down. You'll find crew cards, honorary presentation books, medal books, service books and more.

The service records don't include the names of personnel, but they do give information on wrecks in date order, with the weather conditions, and often the number of people saved.

If your ancestor died trying to rescue others, they might be commemorated on the RNLI Memorial, which is situated in Poole, Dorset. Search for names on the RNLI's website: www.snipca.com/53223. Also search the RNLI journal *The Lifeboat* (www.snipca.com/53224), including the lifeboat station and ancestor's surname.



Select an RNLI book in the 'Record type' dropdown menu

Your **Genealogy** Problems Solved

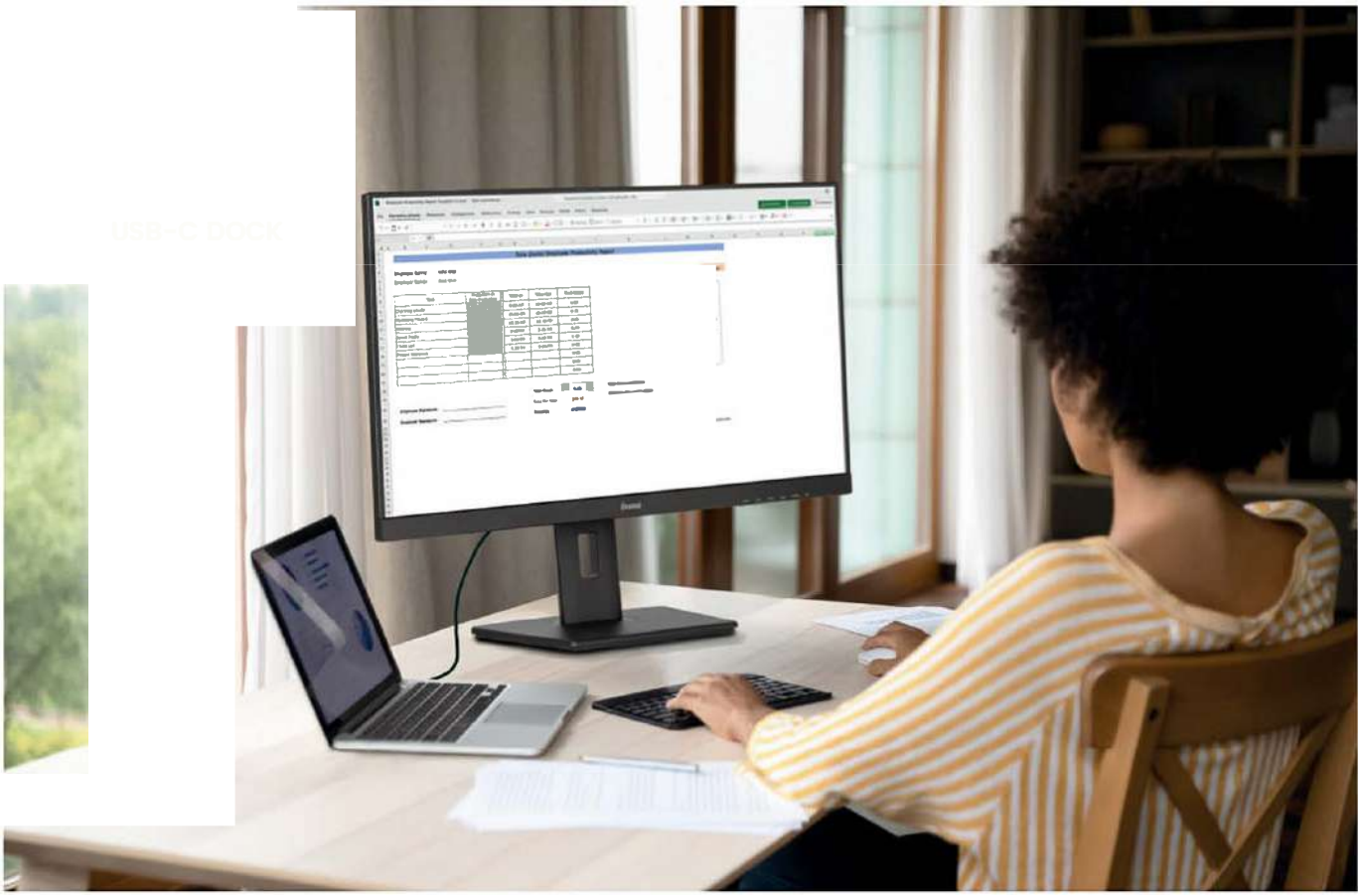
My late father did a carpentry apprenticeship some time between 1946 and 1950. We've lost his apprenticeship papers, so I was wondering if you knew anywhere we could find a copy, or more information. He lived in Cardiff, but I don't know where he did his training.

Helen Hare

You could try contacting the National Library of Wales to see if it has any useful records: www.library.wales. For example, trade directories for Cardiff might help you identify a carpentry business in the area where your father could have served his apprenticeship. It's also possible that your father's apprenticeship was mentioned in a local newspaper – search these for free at https://newspapers.library.wales.

Have a genealogy question for Judith? Email letters@computeractive.co.uk with 'Grow Your Family Tree' in the subject line.

Next issue: Analyse the UK's 1974 boundary changes



DESKTOP MONITORS

SEEKING A SMARTER SOLUTION FOR YOUR WORKSPACE?

Meet the 24" and 27" monitors of the 92 series.

With an integrated USB-C dock, these monitors handle power, data, video, and audio transmission through a single cable, all without compromising quality. The IPS display offers vibrant colors and wide viewing angles, perfect for both work and leisure.

Robert Irvine recommends new programs that won't cost you a thing

SOFTWARE UPDATER

UniGetUI 3.1.5

www.snipca.com/53369
What you need: Windows 10 or 11

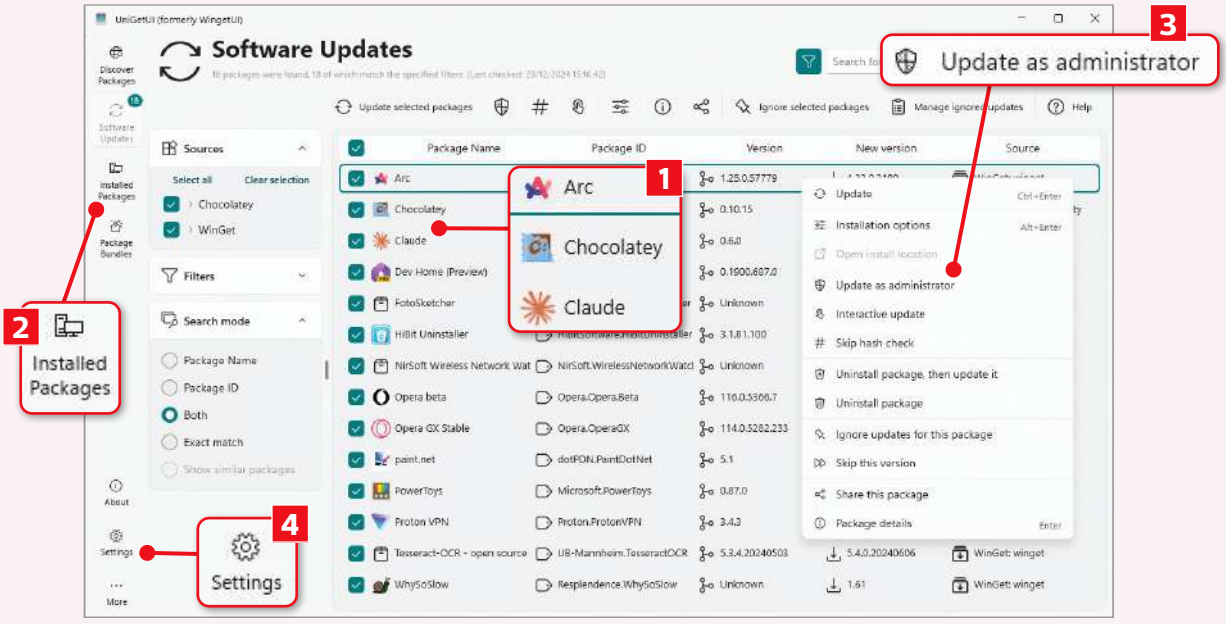
In our 'Never miss another software update' Cover Feature in Issue 697 (read it on our new Back Issue CD and USB stick – see page 34), we recommended UniGetUI as the best way to install and update thousands of programs using package managers. The software itself has now been updated to make it friendlier and faster to use.

UniGetUI now displays logos next to its search results on the Discover Packages tabs, and for software listed on its Software Updates and Installed Packages tabs. This makes it easier to identify programs from their icons as well as their names, though not every entry has a logo. These icons are downloaded once, then stored locally, so UniGetUI doesn't need to retrieve them for every search or scan, and are resized and compressed to take up minimal drive space.

The program now uses an updater called UniGetUI Elevator, which feels more reassuring than the previous 'GSudo' tool, and has improved the reliability of its package-fetching operations. As we mentioned in Issue 697 (page 55), if software installation fails you can usually solve the problem by choosing to update or install as an administrator.

UniGetUI has also added the useful option to delete desktop shortcuts, which are often added without your permission when programs are installed or updated. Click the Settings cog in the bottom-left corner of the main window and select 'Updates preferences'. Tick the box to 'Ask to delete desktop shortcuts created during an install or upgrade'. Click 'Manage shortcuts' to exclude specific shortcuts from the deletion.

Finally, UniGetUI now supports an additional package manager – Vckpg. This is maintained by Microsoft, which uses it to distribute C/C++ libraries and is really only of interest to developers. You can therefore deselect it in the Package Managers list in UniGetUI's Settings.



1 UniGetUI now shows program logos next to their entries in its lists to make them easier to recognise. It also tells you the package name and ID, the number of the software's newest version and the relevant package manager.

2 The Software Updates tab is the most important in UniGetUI, but it's also worth checking the Installed Packages tab. This reveals every package installed on your computer and lets you quickly uninstall any software you no longer need.

3 When an installation fails in UniGetUI, you can usually fix this by updating the program as an administrator. Either right-click the software and choose 'Update as administrator' or click the shield button on the top toolbar.

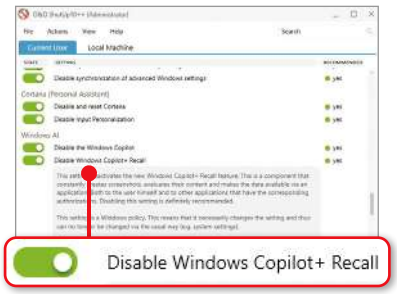
4 To ensure UniGetUI itself remains updated to the latest version, click the Settings cog in the bottom-left corner. Select 'General preferences' and tick 'Update UniGetUI automatically'. You can also install early pre-release versions.

PRIVACY TOOL

O&O ShutUp10++

www.snipca.com/53360

What you need: Windows 10 or 11



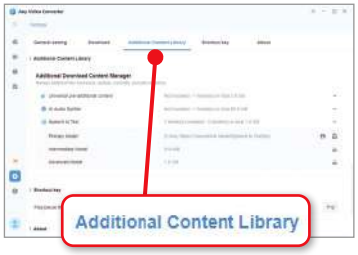
Following its appearance in your top 20 programs of 2024 (see our Cover Feature in Issue 700), O&O ShutUp10++ has been updated with even more ways to disable potentially unwanted features in Windows 10 and 11. These include the new AI tools Microsoft is increasingly pushing on users. On both the Current User and Local Machine tabs, you'll find a new Windows AI section that lets you switch off Microsoft's AI assistant Copilot and controversial Recall feature (see screenshot). If you're using Windows 11, you can also disable AI-powered options in Microsoft Paint, such as Image Creator and Cocreator. Other new settings let you disable the Phone Link app and prevent your PC from connecting to mobile devices. O&O ShutUp10++ now better detects which version of Microsoft Office you're running so you can switch off data collection and 'connected experiences'.

VIDEO CONVERTER

Any Video Converter Free 9.0.6

www.snipca.com/53365

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11



Any Video Converter (AVC) was your fifth-most downloaded program of 2024, and continues to evolve and improve. The latest update adds an Additional Content Library (see screenshot), which lets you install AI models for tools such as the 'Speech to Text' converter and AI Audio Splitter. Some of these models are only available in AVC's paid-for editions, which have now been merged with the free one. This means that if you decide to upgrade to the Pro or Ultimate version (priced from £31 a year), you won't need to download a separate program but can simply unlock the relevant options. AVC Free now supports more than 20 video and audio formats, so will automatically detect most files you add to it. To stop you losing your conversions and edits, a useful new feature alerts you to unsaved content when you switch to a different tool or close AVC.

SHOULD I PAY FOR...?

Choose the right version of software

BootRacer Premium

www.snipca.com/53366

Price: £39.95 **Free trial period:** N/A

What you need: Windows 7, 8.1, 10 or 11

BootRacer is a once-popular tool we'd completely forgotten about until we read about its latest update (to support Windows 11 24H2). It helps speed up your PC's boot time by identifying and disabling unnecessary programs that run on startup. BootRacer is still free for personal use, but its Premium version offers plenty of extra features. Helpfully, you can try '80 per cent' of these without signing up for an account or entering payment-card details, to decide whether it's worth upgrading.

The Premium options include Quick Tweak (see screenshot), which lets you disable Windows settings that compromise your system's performance and privacy – much like O&O ShutUp10++ (see left). Ultimate Service Optimizer detects and disables 'useless' hardware and services that are running in the background, while Explorer Startup Delay stops Windows waiting to launch important tools each time you start your PC.

BootRacer Premium also scans your startup programs for malware, but to remove them you need to buy UnHackMe from the same developer, which is a bit of a rip-off. In any case, the built-in Windows Security deals with these threats for free.

Other Premium options relate to the style of the 'finish screen' BootRacer displays after testing your boot speed, so are hardly essential. You also get a lifetime of updates and 'bonus packs'. Commendably, the price of the program is a one-off payment, rather than an auto-renewing subscription.

OUR VERDICT: Don't pay for it

Although BootRacer Premium offers several advantages over the standard program, you can get most of the features for free from other system-optimisation software. Any tool that cuts your PC's boot time is always welcome, but £40 is still a lot to spend.

What should I download?

We advise you which software and apps to use

What's the best alternative to Pinnacle Studio?

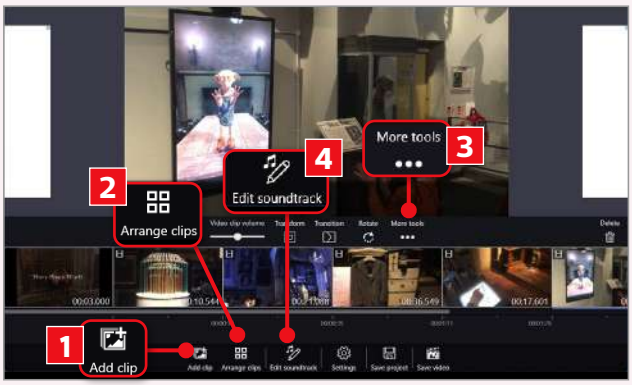
Q I've been using Pinnacle Studio 12 video-editing software since 2008. The latest versions of this program are too complicated so I want to try something new, but no software I've tried seems to offer Pinnacle's full-screen Storyboard view. It lets me see a whole page of clips, allowing me to delete or edit them in seconds, re-arrange the order, add soundtracks and more. Is there another program that offers this type of view?

Richard Malin

A The Storyboard view has fallen out of fashion these days in favour of the more powerful but complex Timeline view. However, there's still one that we recommend: Movie Maker – Video Editor (www.snipca.com/53213). It offers a cut-down ad-supported free version that has everything you need. First, click 'Add clip' (1 in our screenshot) to import your video clips (you can also add titles and credits here). Now drag and drop the clips into the desired running order, though if you have more than eight clips click 'Arrange clips' 2 to view them together, making them easier to rearrange.

You can trim or split clips using options on the 'More tools' button 3. Click 'Transitions' to apply one of three effects (Fade, Wave or Wind) between clips, and choose 'Edit soundtrack' 4 to insert a music track or record a voiceover.

When you're finished, click Save Video to save your movie in HD format. The Pro version (£16.49) removes all ads, lets you work on more than one project at a time, outputs movies in 4K and unlocks additional features, including over 30 transition effects.



What's the best software for producing a charity magazine?

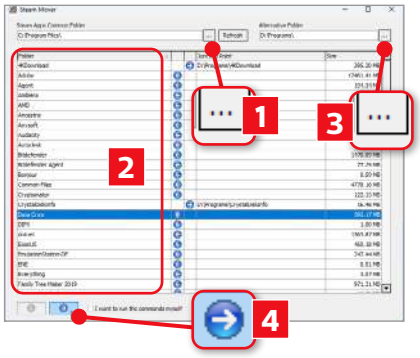
Q My local charity group produces a quarterly magazine. We do this using an old computer that now needs upgrading to Windows 11. This will cause problems with the old software we use (Adobe Indesign/Illustrator/Photoshop). Can you suggest the best alternatives?

Keith Brushett

A For free alternatives try Scribus (www.scribus.net) for desktop publishing, Paint.NET (https://getpaint.net) for photo editing, and Inkscape (https://inkscape.org) for vector illustrations. However, if you can afford it, spend £159.99 on Serif's Affinity suite (www.snipca.com/53215). This offers direct replacements for the three Adobe programs you mention in the form of Affinity Designer, Photo and Publisher (shown in our screenshot). They're available as free trials.

How can I move apps to a spare drive?

Q I want to move old apps from the Windows 11 main drive to my spare drive. I can't see an option for doing this using the Apps page in Windows' Settings. Is there a program that can do this for me?



Tony Pelham

A The option in Windows Settings only works with apps installed from the Microsoft Store. To get round this, use the free program Steam Mover – click the link below the Download heading at www.snipca.com/53216. Click the three horizontal dots to the right of Steam Apps Common Folder (1 in our screenshot) then select the folder containing the apps you want to move. You'll see the programs it contains 2. Now click the dots to the right of Alternative Folder 3 to select a folder on the drive. Select the app to move, then click the right-pointing arrow button 4.

Named & Shamed

Keumars Afifi-Sabet puts the boot into tech villains, jargon-spouting companies and software trying to trick you

SOFTWARE WARNING!

Awful ads in Microsoft 365's PDF reader app

Many smaller developers make money by cramming their apps with adverts. I totally get this because they need to find a way to compete with the big boys. But there's no excuse for companies as huge as Microsoft.

And yet what's that lurking at the top of screenshot 1? It's taken from the PDF reader in the Android version of the Microsoft 365 app (www.snipca.com/53246). When you're working on PDFs on small phone and tablet screens, the last thing you need is a full-width banner advert.

I have no idea which newsletter it's asking me to subscribe to, and I don't care. I just want to edit my PDF. But in the interests of research I tapped it and was redirected through several sites, all containing misleading headlines and moronic news 'stories'. It's the kind of trash Microsoft should be ashamed of promoting. These ads appear even if you Microsoft pay for extra PDF features, such as converting capabilities – although mysteriously we didn't see them in the iOS version of the app.

1
Subscribe to the Newsletter
Ad · Stay up to date on cutting-edge AI + Qua...
Remoli
LUNCH DEAL
Pasta*, Side & Drink 14
Cacio e Pepe, Creamy Mushroom, Arrabbiata or Bolognese and choice of a side: fried potatoes, side salad or bread & focaccia, with any soft drink.

Clicking this advert reveals misleading headlines and moronic news stories

Use the excellent MJ PDF instead – it's free and has no ads

Perhaps I'm getting too upset though, because there's no need to use Microsoft's PDF reader anyhow. Instead, you should use the excellent Android app MJ PDF (www.snipca.com/52749, see screenshot 2). It's free and lets you see your PDFs in high quality without polluting your screen with hideous ads.

WHAT ARE THEY TALKING ABOUT?

WHAT THEY SAY

Mozilla on its new logo (pictured)
www.snipca.com/53149
"The flag symbol highlights our activist spirit, signifying a commitment to 'Reclaim the Internet'. A symbol of belief, peace, unity, pride, celebration and team spirit – built from the 'M' for Mozilla and a pixel that is conveniently displaced to reveal a wink to its iconic Tyrannosaurus rex symbol."

WHAT THEY MEAN

Yes, we know it looks awful too, but using such pompous language at least makes us feel clever.

KEUMARS' VILLAINS OF THE FORTNIGHT

Russian hacking gang Akira

When William Knight founded the delivery firm Knights of Old in 1865 he had just one horse and a cart. By 2023, it had expanded to 400 trucks and 900 staff. Then in March that year it was attacked by Russian cyber-gang Akira, which paralysed its IT system and demanded a ransom. Six months later, unable to recover, the company went bust.

Paul Abbott, group director of KNP which owned Knights of Old, recently spoke to *The Times* about the attack, warning businesses to take such threats more seriously. He said the ransom demand (up to $5.3m, around £4.2m) was "financially prohibitive" and they couldn't guarantee the hackers would unlock their system anyway.

It's thought in the past few years Akira has stolen $42 million from 350 firms and organizations worldwide, wrecking thousands of lives. Let's hope they don't survive 2025.

CREDIT: Facebook/Knights of Old

LAPTOP | **£1,316** from Dell www.snipca.com/53211

Dell Latitude 7455

Keep on running

Dell's Latitude 7455 is a pricey Copilot+ laptop, but for that you get a fast processor, an eye-catching screen and an exceptional battery life.

It's built around the Qualcomm Snapdragon X Elite X1E-80-100 chip, backed up by 16GB of RAM and a 512GB SSD. Be aware that as with all the Snapdragon Copilot+ laptops we've reviewed recently, they run a different version of Windows 11 Home than laptops that use Intel or AMD processors. It doesn't work with some security programs, games and professional creative software, including Adobe Premiere Pro.

> "The longest battery life we've ever seen should see you through two working days"

To see what is and isn't supported, visit https://windowsonarm.org, then scroll down and check the second column in the list of software (anything other than 'Not supported' means it'll work fine).

The X Elite X1E-80-100 has the highest specifications of any Snapdragon processor we've seen to date. However, in benchmark tests that push the processor to its limits, it produced results that were remarkably close to those we saw with the Asus Vivobook S 15 (£899 from www.snipca.com/51051, reviewed in Issue 688), which uses the slightly less powerful X Elite X1E-78-100 processor.

The Latitude runs around 11 per cent faster than our current favourite laptop, Dell's Inspiron 14 Plus (£799 from www.snipca.com/51831, see page 30), which uses an Intel Core Ultra 7 155H chip. However, having an Intel processor means the Inspiron can run the standard version of Windows 11, which is compatible with *all* Windows software.

Where this new Dell laptop comes into its own is in the staying power of its battery. It keeps going longer than any laptop we've ever reviewed. In tests that simulate office work it lasted for over 19 hours, which is a phenomenal result. That should get you through a couple of days of work without having to plug it in.

It has a sleek appearance, with a cool-to-the-touch aluminium case and a lightly brushed metal finish. The keys (pictured below) are average size, but generously spaced, so typing doesn't feel cramped. The trackpad is also a pleasure to use, and was responsive to our taps and gestures.

The screen is based on IPS technology, which definitely helps prolong battery life compared with more demanding OLED panels. And for an IPS screen it's surprisingly bright, capable of a dazzling 400cd/m². Its 2560x1600-pixel resolution is generous for a 14in screen, making it look sharper than the display on the Inspiron, which has a lower resolution of 2240x1400 pixels.

The Latitude is, however, a little light on ports, with two USB-C, one USB 3.2 and an audio jack. There's no HDMI port, so if you want to use it with a monitor you'll need a USB-C hub.

SPECIFICATIONS

Twelve-core Qualcomm Snapdragon X Elite X1E-80-100 processor • 45 TOPS • 16GB RAM • Qualcomm Adreno graphics • 14in 2560x1600-pixel IPS screen • 512GB SSD • Wi-Fi 7 • Bluetooth 5.4 • 2x USB-C ports • 1x USB 3.2 port • 1x microSD slot • Windows 11 Home • 17x314x224mm (HxWxD) • 1.44kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/53211

VERDICT An impressive laptop that offers nippy performance levels and a battery that keeps on going

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Dell Inspiron 14 Plus £799 Surprisingly decent Windows performance for the price, but the screen and battery life are inferior

MINI PC | **£799** from Apple www.snipca.com/53229

Apple Mac mini M4

Small systems go

It isn't only Windows PC manufacturers that have their eyes on the growing popularity of mini desktop computers. Apple also has an interest, having sold the Mac mini since 2005. This latest model is built around Apple's M4 processor, which has proved immensely popular in MacBooks and iPad Pros, and has finally made its way to this redesigned tiny Mac.

> "The smallest Mac ever is beautifully made, lightning fast and cheaper than ever"

Before we go on, it's worth stating the obvious. Apple's computers use their own operating system, called macOS, which takes some getting used to if you're more familiar with Windows. Switch to a macOS computer now and expect to spend a good amount of time relearning how to do even quite basic tasks, such as copying files from one place to another.

However, there's probably never been a better budget Mac than this, if you're thinking of making the leap. Apple calls the redesigned mini its "smallest computer ever", and it measures only 127x127x50mm, easily fitting in the palm of your hand.

The base Mac mini model costs £599 and comes with 16GB of RAM and a 256GB SSD. That's a tad light on storage for our liking, so we've opted to test the 512GB SSD here, which costs £200 more. That's an expensive upgrade, but you can't change internal components yourself later on.

The mini's M4 chip outperforms the AMD Ryzen 9 8945HS in our current favourite Windows mini PC, the Geekom A8 (£899 from www.snipca.com/53229, see page 32) in benchmark tests that push the processors to their limits. And while it can't compete with specialised gaming PCs, we were pleasantly surprised by how well it handled 3D games.

That said, you get more for your money with the Geekom A8, which comes with 32GB of RAM and a 2TB SSD. Apple will build you a Mac mini with the same RAM and storage but will charge you an eye-watering £1,799 for it. We suspect most people will live with less.

As well as being fast, Apple's M-class chips are exceptionally power-efficient, which means it generates little heat and requires minimal cooling, and therefore stays silent in operation.

As you'd expect from Apple, the unit is beautifully designed. The aluminium case is robust and stylish. It lacks any standard USB ports, but comes with five USB-C (two at the front, three at the back, pictured left), an HDMI and a Gigabit Ethernet port.

SPECIFICATIONS

10-core Apple M4 processor • 16GB RAM • 512GB SSD • Wi-Fi 6E • Bluetooth 5.3 • 1x Gigabit Ethernet port • 5x USB-C ports • 1x HDMI port • 1x 3.5mm headphone jack • macOS Sequoia • 50x127x127mm (HxWxD) • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/53229

HOW WE TEST

Computeractive is owned by Future PLC, which employs a team of specialist technical reviewers. You'll often read references to our benchmark testing, which is a method of assessing products using the same criteria. For example, we test the speed of every PC and the battery life of every phone and tablet in exactly the same way. This makes our reviews authoritative, rigorous and accurate.

Future PLC also owns the magazines *Maximum PC*, *PC Pro* and *T3*, and the websites Laptop Mag (www.laptopmag.com), TechRadar (www.techradar.com) and Windows Central (www.windowscentral.com). This means we can test thousands of products before choosing the most relevant for *Computeractive*.

FAIR AND IMPARTIAL

Our writers follow strict guidelines to ensure the reviews are fair and impartial. The manufacturer has no involvement in our tests.

OUR AWARDS

We award every product that gets five stars our Buy It! stamp of approval. It means we were extremely impressed by the product, and we think you will be too.

Every product that gets a four-star review is given the Recommended award. We highly recommend these products, although they just fail to meet the high standard of our Buy It! winners.

PRICES

Our reviews contain a link to the best price we found online at the time of press.

VERDICT Apple's new mini PC is attractively priced, incredibly fast and gorgeously designed, but gets expensive if you want extra storage

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Geekom A8 £899 Get much more for your money with this Windows mini PC, which isn't quite as fast but has more RAM and storage

TABLET | **£419** from OnePlus www.snipca.com/53247

OnePlus Pad 2

And then two come at once

If you're looking for a decent Android tablet, you're spoiled for choice at the moment. In Issue 700, we reviewed the 12.3in Honor MagicPad2 (£400 from www.snipca.com/53150) and hailed it as our new favourite Android tablet. Here, we look at a subtly different alternative, the OnePlus Pad 2, which has a slightly smaller 12.1in screen but otherwise rivals the MagicPad 2 in most areas.

They have similar components. The Pad 2 is built around the Qualcomm Snapdragon 8 Gen 3 processor, while the MagicPad has a Snapdragon 8s Gen 3. The cheaper 8s is newer, but it lacks some of its predecessor's features. For one thing it has a less powerful graphics chip and one fewer performance core, opting instead for one extra efficiency core (three in total). This slows overall performance but boosts battery life. Both devices have 12GB of RAM and 256GB of storage.

> "An impressive tablet with excellent screen, long-lasting battery and great gaming performance"

Yet despite having one fewer performance core, the MagicPad ran 12-per-cent faster than the Pad 2 in our tests. However, in gaming tests the Pad 2 came out on top – and even outperformed more expensive tablets from Apple and Samsung.

Although slightly smaller, the Pad 2's screen has a higher 3000x2120-pixel resolution (compared with 3000x1920 pixels). This makes everything slightly sharper, though the difference isn't easy to make out with the naked eye. The MagicPad's screen is also a tad squarer, which is ideal for working on documents and browsing websites, but means you get wide black bars at the top and bottom of the screen when you're watching films and TV series.

OnePlus's Oxygen OS operating sytem is one of the better Android variants, with a taskbar that makes it easier to run apps in split screen or as resizable floating windows. OnePlus sells an optional keyboard with a trackpad (£104), which is handy if you want to use the tablet for creating documents and spreadsheets.

The Pad 2 has plenty of connection options, with Wi-Fi 7, Bluetooth 5.4 and a USB-C port that's capable of transferring data at a nippy 5Gbps. The port also supports 67-Watt fast charging, though OnePlus doesn't provide a charger, so you'll need to buy this separately.

Both the 13-megapixel rear-facing (pictured left) and 8-megapixel front-facing cameras are surprisingly good, capturing detailed, well-exposed photos and video, even when lighting conditions aren't perfect. And if you want to use it for video calls, this one is very much up to the job.

We were impressed by the MagicPad 2's battery life, which lasted 18 hours in our video-playback test. That's an excellent result, but the Pad 2 is even better, managing an additional half hour. That's not a massive leap, but given its more demanding processor still comes as a pleasant surprise.

So which tablet should you opt for? The Pad 2 is better for gaming, while the MagicPad offers better overall Android performance. If you're not interested in a tablet for playing games, we'd suggest basing your decision on price. Both models have been available at generous discounts recently, and at the time of writing the MagicPad had dropped from £500 to £400, making it better value. But if the Pad 2 has a similar price drop, we'd happily recommend that instead.

SPECIFICATIONS

Eight-core Qualcomm Snapdragon 8 Gen 3 processor • 12GB RAM • 256GB storage • 12.1in 3000x2120-pixel IPS screen • 13-megapixel rear camera • 8-megapixel front-facing camera • Wi-Fi 7 • Bluetooth 5.4 • Android 14 • 195x269x6.5mm (HxWxD) • 584g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/53247

VERDICT This is one of the best Android tablets around with fast performance levels and a durable battery, but shop around for the best price

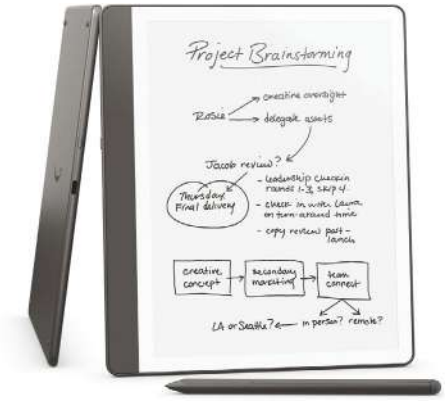
★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Honor MagicPad2 £400 A very similar tablet with a slightly larger screen – albeit with lower resolution – and marginally superior Android performance

EBOOK READER | **£380** from Amazon www.snipca.com/53343

Amazon Kindle Scribe

Writes and wrongs



While the new Amazon Kindle (£95 from www.snipca.com/53137, reviewed in Issue 700) was a little underwhelming, the changes made to the latest version of the Kindle Scribe are – at first glance, at least – more likely to get your pulse racing. As with the original 2022 version (£330 from www.snipca.com/53347, reviewed in Issue 649), this new Scribe comes with a stylus and lets you make notes as you read.

Amazon has stoked a lot of hype in the US about the Scribe's new AI tools, which the company says improves handwriting recognition and summarises any notes that you make.

> "It has a great screen and comes with note-taking stylus, but where are the AI tools?"

The disappointment for British customers is that these AI tools aren't available in the UK, and there are no plans to add them. That doesn't mean they'll never arrive, but it's a glaring omission at this stage.

That said, there are benefits to be had from the new Scribe. It comes with a Premium Pen stylus, which is better than the device that accompanied the 2022 version – and you had to pay £30 extra for it back then.

Screen size is the same at 10.2in across the diagonal, and maintains the same high resolution – namely, a pixel density of 300dpi, which is very sharp. The bezel around the edge of the screen is now white plastic, which makes the whole fascia look more like paper.

It's the note-taking function that really sets it apart from the other models. You can't scribble directly on to books, but when you start making a note, a text box opens to surround the area you're writing in. This expands as you need it, while the text of the ebook you're reading flows around it. You can also simply draw a box on the page, then fill that with your scribbles.

There is also the option to just use this e-reader as a notepad. Alternatively, Amazon offers a growing range of books that you can write directly into, such as planners and diaries.

This is all well and good but the upshot is that the Scribe is pricey (£380 for the cheapest 16GB version), which is equivalent to the US prices despite lacking those new AI tools. Therefore, we think the UK version of this release is disappointing and overpriced. We prefer the Kindle Paperwhite (£160 from www.snipca.com/52730, reviewed in Issue 698), which is much better value for money, even though it doesn't also work as a notebook.

SPECIFICATIONS

10.2in 300ppi E Ink touchscreen • From 16GB storage • Wi-Fi 4 • USB-C charging port • 230x196x5.8mm (HxWxD) • 433g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/53343

VERDICT A decent Kindle if you want a large screen and note-taking functionality, but it's overpriced for what you get

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE

Kindle Paperwhite £160 A smaller, cheaper ebook reader with a similar- quality screen, but you can't scribble notes on it

CHOOSE THE RIGHT SPECS

Mobile security hardware

What is it?

Most smartphones and tablets now have security hardware built in. These are components that let banks know they can trust the apps you have installed on your device, and lock away personal data, such as passwords and payment-card information in wallet apps. It might also encrypt the data on your phone so it can't be accessed if your device is stolen.

How does it work?

In most mobile devices, this hardware is built into the main processor. On the iPhone, for example, a section of the processor is cordoned off from the rest of the device and works independently for security tasks. Most Android phones work the same way. However, Google's Pixel phones (such as the Pixel 9, pictured) use a completely separate processor for these tasks.

What are the specs?

Google's security chip is called the Titan M2 and is found on its Pixel devices. On iPhones, the security area on Apple's M4 chips is called the Security Enclave. On Android phones that use Qualcomm Snapdragon processors, it's called Qualcomm Secure Execution Environment (QSEE). They all perform a similar job, but Google's system is probably the most secure, because malware would have to physically leave the dedicated security processor and access the main Titan M2 chip to expose any sensitive information.

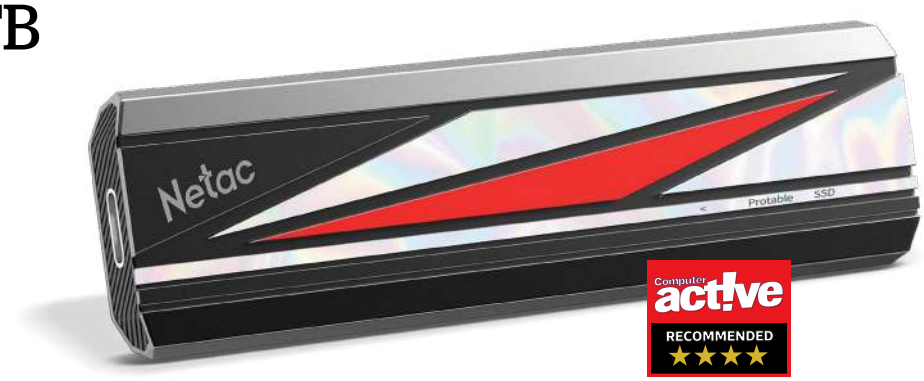
Can I change it later?

No. Manufacturers might update the firmware on a processor to make it faster or more secure at a later date, but you can't make any tweaks of your own, and you can't swap it for a different model.

PORTABLE SSD | **£146** from Amazon www.snipca.com/53308

Netac ZX20L 2TB

Take a drive



This external SSD comes with a USB-C port that means you can connect it to almost any PC, laptop, phone or tablet. We're reviewing the 2TB version here, but if you want to sacrifice some capacity to save money, it's also available with 1TB (£86 from www.snipca.com/53309), 512GB (£57 from www.snipca.com/53310) and 256GB (£43 from www.snipca.com/53311). This large capacity for a portable SSD makes it ideal for high-demand use such as video editing, photo editing and gaming

Bear in mind that you'll need a very specific type of USB-C port – called USB 3.2 Gen 2x2 – on the connected device to get the top quoted speeds of 20Gbps. Check your laptop or PC's manual or specifications. If your other device has a different port standard – such as Thunderbolt 3 or 4, or USB 4.0 – the SSD will only manage 10Gbps transfer rates at best.

It certainly looks distinctive, with shard patterns on an aluminium alloy shell, and feels both light and robust. It weighs around 50g and measures just 9.2x102x30mm (HxWxD), so is light enough to carry around and small enough to fit into your pocket.

> "With the right kind of connections this external SSD is lightning fast and handles tough tasks with ease"

It's designed as a plug-and-play, easy-to-use device, so doesn't have many extra features. It arrives pre-formatted so can be used with pretty much any type of device.

We tested it with a Windows laptop that has a USB 3.2 Gen 2x2 port and a MacBook Pro with Thunderbolt ports. Our results showed that the ZX20L was significantly faster with the Windows machine, where it excelled in both reading and writing files.

We also tested the drive by editing 4K video stored on it, which is about the most challenging task you can ask of an SSD, because it requires the drive to shift a lot of data around quickly. Here, the difference between both machines was barely noticeable.

The engraved design aids heat dissipation by increasing the surface area. As a consequence the ZX20L warmed up during use, but never became hot.

SPECIFICATIONS
Available in 2TB, 1TB, 512GB and 256GB capacities • USB-C 3.2 Gen 2x2 connector • Speeds up to 20Gbps • No software included • 9.2x102x30mm (HxWxD) • 50g • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/53308

VERDICT A fast external SSD that will connect to any USB-C device, but is particularly fast with models that have USB 3.2 Gen 2x2 standard

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Netac US9 £66 A smaller thumb drive SSD with two types of USB connection for greater flexibility

WHAT SHOULD I BUY? We solve your buying dilemmas

What's the best soundbar for my TV?

Q I want to buy a soundbar – such as the Saiyin DS6305 (£40 from www.snipca.com/53312, pictured) or the Creative Sound Blaster GS3 (£50 from www.snipca.com/52533) reviewed in Issue 696.

The connections offered by these soundbars are USB-C, Bluetooth, optical and auxiliary. My TV is an LG 32LH3000 and doesn't seem to have any of these connections, though it does have composite video as well as a headphone socket. Can either of these be used to connect to the soundbar?

Peter Miller

A We've taken a look at your TV's specifications and manual, and it has more ports than you think.

The two you've listed are easily accessible on the side of the TV, but around the back, next to the aerial socket, you should find another panel with more ports, including an optical digital audio port. This would be the easiest way to connect to the Saiyin DS6305, because it comes with an optical cable.

Check around the back of your TV and download the manual if needed from LG at www.snipca.com/53314. You'll find guidance about the ports on page 23. If all else fails, however, you could connect a soundbar's auxilliary port to the headphone socket.

Do you need advice on what you should buy? Email us at letters@computeractive.co.uk

VIDEO BIRD FEEDER | **£370** from Birdfy www.snipca.com/53289

Birdfy Feeder 2 Duo

Top seed

This bird feeder might seem incredibly expensive at first glance, but as well as delivering food to your feathered friends, it notifies you when they arrive and films them as they eat. What's more, the Birdfy Feeder 2 Duo can access a database of birds to identify each visitor, collating the information into daily lists of species. And with a pair of cameras, it captures footage from more than one angle.

The main camera, located centrally, has a useful pan-and-zoom function that can follow birds around the feeder for the best shot. The secondary side camera has a wider-angle lens, which helps to fit larger birds in the frame. The species-recognition system can also sound an alarm if a squirrel visits the table, though we found our local squirrels pretty much ignored it.

Power for the Wi-Fi connection and cameras comes from a solar panel that works well even on overcast days, so you should never have to recharge the batteries.

The main camera's picture quality is excellent, and while images from the secondary camera weren't quite up to that standard, they're still perfectly acceptable. Both record in Full HD resolution rather than 4K, which won't be sharp enough for some.

This may be expensive for a bird feeder, but enthusiasts will find it a delight. The dual cameras add a unique perspective, but if you can live without the second camera, the Birdfy Feeder 2 Pro offers a more affordable single-camera alternative (see below).

SPECIFICATIONS
1080p video resolution • 2x rechargeable battery (one in each camera) • Unlimited online recording for 30 days • 300x267x300mm (HxWxD) • 1.46kg • One-year warranty www.snipca.com/53289

VERDICT Expensive but an incredibly fun way to keep an eye on the birds that visit your garden

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Birdfy Feeder 2 Pro £260 A cheaper alternative with a single camera

SPEAKER | **£119** from Amazon www.snipca.com/53294

Bose SoundLink Flex

Music to your ears

This is one of the best Bluetooth speakers we've ever tested. It's a small, portable unit with an IP67 protection rating. In simple terms, that means it won't break if used in dusty or dirty environments, and can survive being immersed in up to one metre of water for 30 minutes. That makes it perfect for when you're pottering around the garden or enjoying a beach holiday.

Most importantly, music sounds superb. Individual instruments were distinct and vocals came through crystal clear. High frequencies are delivered with delicacy and finesse, mid-ranges sound rich, and bass – although not delivering as much impact as a large-sized party speaker – has solid depth and dynamism.

It suffered some distortion at its very highest volume settings, but most people won't need to turn it up to those kinds of levels, which are incredibly loud. It connects to a smartphone via an app, which you can use to adjust the sound with an equaliser and change volume levels.

The build quality is impressive, with smooth, curved corners, a rubbery body and beautifully finished speaker grille. Battery life lasts 12 hours when playing at 50-per-cent volume and it charges from a USB-C port.

However, it has stiff competition. We think the Ultimate Ears Wonderboom 4 (£90 from www.snipca.com/53297, reviewed in Issue 697) has many of the same features, but offers better value for money and a longer battery life.

SPECIFICATIONS
12-hour battery life • USB-C charging port • IP67 ingress protection • Bluetooth 5.3 • 90x201x52mm (HxWxD) • 590g • Two-year warranty www.snipca.com/53294

VERDICT An excellent Bluetooth speaker with exceptional sound quality that you can use outside without any worries

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Ultimate Ears Wonderboom 4 £90 A slightly cheaper speaker with similar features and a longer battery life

GAME | **£70** (Standard) from Steam www.snipca.com/53352

Microsoft Flight Simulator 2024

Sky high

Computeractive RECOMMENDED ★★★★

We know that Microsoft Flight Simulator has always been popular with *Computeractive* readers, but it's typically been aimed at aviation enthusiasts rather than casual gamers. The last version, released in 2020, took the simulation to new levels of realism, with data from Bing Maps allowing virtual pilots to fly around the world in extraordinary detail. What there was less of, however, was an actual game that could give those who don't obsess about flaps and ailerons more of a reason to pick up the software.

That's been fixed in this new version with the addition of a career mode. This encourages you to fly a series of missions in a range of different planes. These start small, with simple tourism and local delivery tasks, but grow to include firefighting, search and rescue, helicopter transport, air ambulance, agricultural aviation, mountain rescue (pictured top), skydiving and aerial construction missions. Each require a distinct set of skills and familiarity with different types of cockpit and aircraft. In the process you'll progress through your career from freelance pilot to owning your own plane.

At the time of writing, the career mode was still experiencing a few glitches that may prevent you from completing missions. However, it's still a fun and interesting way into the software for many.

You can of course just stick to the basics – taking off, cruising and landing a selection of aircraft at an airport of your choice. In the standard edition (£70) you have 70 aircraft and 150 airports to choose from. These increase through the Deluxe and Premium Deluxe versions, with the most expensive Aviator edition costing £200 and offering 125 aircraft and 160 airports.

The 2024 edition presents its world in incredible detail, with higher-resolution graphics available if your PC can handle them. To make this possible without filling your hard drive with destinations you may never visit, the software streams the landscape from the 'cloud' as you play. This is great if you have a decent broadband connection but those with slower connections will struggle. Make sure your PC matches the system requirements listed below left, otherwise your experience may be disappointing.

SYSTEM REQUIREMENTS

64bit Windows 10 or better • AMD Ryzen 5 2600X or Intel Core i7-6800K or better • Minimum 16GB RAM • Radeon RX 5700 or GeForce GTX 970 or better • 50GB minimum storage space • Broadband network speed of 10Mbps www.snipca.com/53352

VERDICT A new route into this game makes things more interesting, though its basic simulation elements remain

★★★★★

ALTERNATIVE Microsoft Flight Simulator 40th Anniversary Edition £30 The previous version is now discounted from £70 if your PC can't handle the latest release

DO I REALLY NEED...

An AI-powered voice recorder?

What is it?

A recording device called Pocket (pictured) made by US firm Openvision Engineering. Slightly smaller than a smartphone, it records conversations and analyses them using AI.

What does it do?

Paired with an app on your smartphone, it transcribes conversations you've recorded, whether over the phone or face to face. It gives you a summary, letting you identify who said what and focus on key sections.

What's the catch?

For once it isn't the price – the Pocket only costs $79 (around £63) and lets you record 200 minutes of conversation a month for free. However, it's already sold out on the manufacturer's website at www.openvision.engineering.

So can I do without it?

You'll have to, until more become available. Check back in a couple of months.

NEXT ISSUE

On Sale Weds 29 Jan

GMKtec NucBox G6
A sub-£200 mini PC that's great for browsing and office work

Chuwi Hi10 X1
A 10in tablet that runs Windows 11 and is cheaper than you'd expect

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Buy It

Find out which other products we liked. Buy our 2024 **Back Issue CD**: £18 from **www.snipca.com/53179**

Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

LAPTOP

Dell Inspiron 14 Plus
£799 from www.snipca.com/51831
Tested Issue 683

This laptop has the same processor (Intel Core Ultra 7 155H) as our previous favourite (Acer Swift Go 4), but manages to squeeze more speed out of it. It also comes with 16GB RAM, 512GB SSD and a 14in 2240x1400-pixel screen. Excellent value overall.

ALTERNATIVE Acer Swift Go 14 Still a fast and powerful laptop, with a great 14in screen. £1,099 from www.snipca.com/49733

DESKTOP PC

Palicomp AMD Cobra
£400 from www.snipca.com/43515
Tested Issue 643

This fast PC is a mouth-watering bargain, with 16GB of RAM, a 2TB SSD and a six-core processor – though it lacks USB-C ports and built-in Wi-Fi.

ALTERNATIVE Wired2Fire Ultima WS Home Office Workstation Blisteringly fast PC, powered by an overclocked eight-core processor and 1TB SSD. £656 from www.snipca.com/41500

APPLE iPAD

PRICE DROP

Apple iPad 10.9in
£309 from www.snipca.com/53386
Tested Issue 646

The price of the 10th-generation iPad, released in 2022, has fallen far enough that it's better value than earlier models. If the John Lewis price above has expired, get it for £329 on Apple's site.

ALTERNATIVE iPad mini 7 The 2024 version of the mini improves the colour accuracy on the 8.3in screen and has a more powerful processor. £499 from www.snipca.com/52573

ANDROID TABLET

Honor MagicPad2
£400 from www.snipca.com/53150
Tested Issue 700

With a larger screen (12.3in) than the Galaxy Tab S9 (below) and a similar performance for less money, Honor's MagicPad2 is a superb new tablet. The OLED screen has a strikingly sharp resolution, and yet battery life is a mighty 18 hours.

ALTERNATIVE Samsung Galaxy Tab S9 Has a much brighter screen than its predecessor, making it ideal for watching TV. Also has a faster processor, speeding up tasks. £599 (128GB) from www.snipca.com/50039

APPLE iPHONE

Apple iPhone 16
£799 from www.snipca.com/53387
Tested Issue 695

This is the best new iPhone for years, boosted by a processor that's as fast as more expensive models. The screen is excellent, while the new Camera Control button gives lots of ways to take photos.

ALTERNATIVE iPhone 14 Now discounted to £599 (128GB), this remains a speedy phone with great features and an impressive camera. £599 from www.snipca.com/52411

ANDROID PHONE

Google Pixel 7a
£329 from www.snipca.com/53388
Tested Issue 660

A cheaper version of Google's flagship phone, this uses AI to add clarity to photos, and lasts an impressive 10 hours. Has a fast processor and 8GB RAM to supercharge performance.

ALTERNATIVE Nothing Phone 2a Don't be put off by the odd name. This has a distinctive design, superb camera and decent battery life. From a UK company too. £319 from www.snipca.com/49930

Buy It

Our pick of products that have won the Buy It award

MINI PC

Geekom A8
£649 from www.snipca.com/51157
Tested Issue 689

This tiny machine (37x112x112mm) doesn't have much room for ports, but makes up for it with a 2TB SSD, a fast processor and an SD card slot for adding storage. It comes with 32GB RAM, as does a slightly slower model that's typically around £250 cheaper and has only a 1TB SSD. Take your pick.

ALTERNATIVE GMKtec NucBox M7 Pro Has an older processor, but comes with plenty of ports and room to add a graphics card. £440 from www.snipca.com/52858

EBOOK READER

Amazon Kindle Paperwhite
£160 from www.snipca.com/52730
Tested Issue 698

The sixth version of the Paperwhite has a larger screen (7in), faster page turns and longer battery life (12 weeks – up from 10). Its glare-free finish means you can easily read it in bright sunlight, and its 300ppi resolution makes text a joy to read.

ALTERNATIVE Kobo Libra Kobo's first colour e-reader, with over 4,000 tones to make illustrations and photos leap out. £200 from www.snipca.com/50192

SECURITY SOFTWARE

Norton 360 Premium
£19.99 from www.snipca.com/33247
Tested Issue 629

Norton has always performed strongly in our antivirus tests, regularly making the top three. Owned by US firm NortonLifeLock, it's available at a discount on our Software Store. Use the link above for a 10-device, two-year licence. Other versions are available, including Norton 360 for Gamers.

ALTERNATIVE Bitdefender Total Security Another top performer that we're offering at a discount. £19.99 from www.snipca.com/41141

WEBCAM

Logitech C925e Business Webcam
£60 from www.snipca.com/50751
Tested Issue 608

Despite the name, this webcam is also great for home users. Its standout feature is automatically adjusting itself to keep your picture looking sharp. It offers a 78-degree field of view, which is fine for everyday video chats with one person in front of the camera.

ALTERNATIVE Creative Live Cam Sync 4K Affordable 4K webcam with high-quality video that can also capture voice from a distance. £38 from www.snipca.com/51577

PC MONITOR

Philips 27E1N1600AE
£200 from www.snipca.com/51687
Tested Issue 692

An affordable 27in monitor with a sharp resolution, impressive image quality and a sturdy build. It has an HDMI port, a USB-C port and two USB 3.0. The hefty base means you can raise and tilt the monitor easily using just one hand.

ALTERNATIVE Asus ROG Strix XG27ACS Another excellent 27in monitor with 1440p resolution and a fast refresh rate aimed at gamers. £229 from www.snipca.com/49898

SOLID-STATE DRIVE

Corsair MP600 Pro LPX 1TB
£84 from www.snipca.com/52658
Tested Issue 630

In our tests, this M.2 SSD hit speeds of 7,364MB/s and 6,870MB/s when reading and writing data – astonishingly fast scores. It's compatible with the new PCIe 4.0 standard, which is twice as fast as PCIe 3.0. The 1TB model costs £89; 2TB costs £160.

ALTERNATIVE Crucial MX500 500GB As fast as an SSD can get in the traditional 2.5in SATA format, this is a great-value upgrade. £70 from www.snipca.com/37304

COMPETITION

Win 1 of 6...

Majority Snowdon TV soundbars

With an impressive 120W speaker and a built-in subwoofer, the Snowdon TV soundbar provides an audio experience that can't be provided alone by your television. Tailor your audio between music, movie or dialogue and adjust treble and bass settings with the supplied remote to create a sound quality that makes any room feel cinematic.

It has a range of ports and features to enjoy your own music and streaming services. Using the Bluetooth connectivity, you can immerse yourself in a spectrum of sound and enjoy your favourite songs from any phone or Bluetooth device. Alternatively, you can connect your device via the AUX port and play music directly from an MP3 player or audio device.

You can mount it to your walls for a stylish fit, bringing big-screen audio to your living space. Once it's installed, sit back, relax and use the remote control to enjoy your perfect TV audio.

To enter this competition, answer the question at www.snipca.com/53155 and submit your details by midnight Tuesday 28 January. Good luck!

You can buy the **Majority Snowdon TV soundbar** for £52.95 from Amazon (www.snipca.com/53307). For more Majority products, including DVD players, radios and speakers, visit www.majority.co.uk.

PRINTER

Epson EcoTank ET-2830
£250 from www.snipca.com/51715
Tested Issue 676

This has recently risen in price from £180, but it's still better value than the ET-1810 because it adds copying and scanning to its functions for £79 more. Print quality is great, especially for photos, which have crisp details, vivid colours and realistic skin tones.

ALTERNATIVE Epson EcoTank ET-1810
Not the fastest printer, but comes with enough ink for 4,500 mono and 7,500 colour pages. £140 from www.snipca.com/52191

SMART TV

Amazon Fire TV 50in Omni QLED
£500 from www.snipca.com/52542
Tested Issue 694

A fantastic 50in QLED screen with 4K resolution that produces vibrant tones in bright sunlit images and pale, subtle shades in more atmospheric scenes. It provides access to all the streaming services you need, and offers voice control through Alexa.

ALTERNATIVE TCL 32SF540K
Budget TV with a 32in Full HD screen (1980x1080 pixels) and two HDMI ports. £135 from www.snipca.com/52100

ROUTER

Asus RT-AXE7800
£230 from www.snipca.com/52957
Tested Issue 665

This router has Wi-Fi 6E, so will be capable of the fastest possible speeds on the 6GHz network over the next few years. It has five Ethernet ports and also a USB 3.0 port to connect a hard drive or NAS drive.

ALTERNATIVE Synology WRX560
Our previous favourite remains an excellent choice, delivering speeds of up to 791.5Mbps. Add more units to set up mesh Wi-Fi. £210 from www.snipca.com/52051

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Workshops & Tips

14 pages of easy-to-follow workshops and expert tips

35 Read and send emails when you're offline
38 Master Windows 11's Energy Saver feature
40 Readers' Tips
42 Browser Tips: Search the web using ChatGPT

PLUS
44 Phone & Tablet Tips
46 Make Windows Better
47 Make Office Better
48 In the Club: Create a digital notebook

HOW TO...

Read and send emails when you're offline

by Nik Rawlinson

What you need: Gmail; OneDrive; Thunderbird **Time required:** One hour

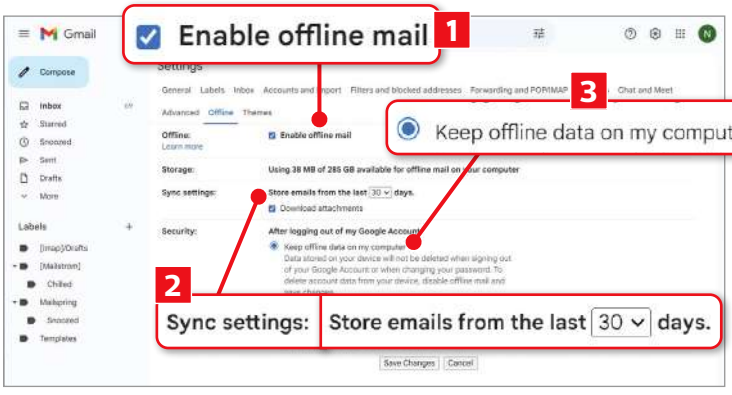
It's easy to forget how novel it is to be online around the clock. For most of us, broadband has only been a reality for the last couple of decades, yet we now feel lost without an internet connection. No more streaming TV, no music-service subscription, and in many cases no email – as our inboxes increasingly live in the cloud. Thankfully, the latter of those is easily solved, as leading email providers like Google's Gmail and Microsoft Outlook have offline modes which, if set up in advance of any problems, give access to your messages whether you're online or off, at home or away. Here, we explain how to make the most of them.

1 Set up Gmail for offline access

Gmail isn't enabled for offline use by default: you need to opt in by first logging in through a browser. You'll need to be using a Chromium-based browser, which shouldn't pose too much of an issue, since almost every browser is built using Chromium code. The only notable exception is Firefox. The only other requirement – aside from a Gmail account – is that you're not using it in incognito or private browsing mode.

Log into Gmail, then click the cog top right to open its settings sidebar. Click the 'See all settings' button, then click Offline on the toolbar. Here, tick the box next to 'Enable offline mail' (1 in our screenshot).

If you intend to work with your email offline when you're not connected to the internet, you'll first need to make sure you have a copy stored on your computer.



Enable Gmail's offline mode while you still have an internet connection

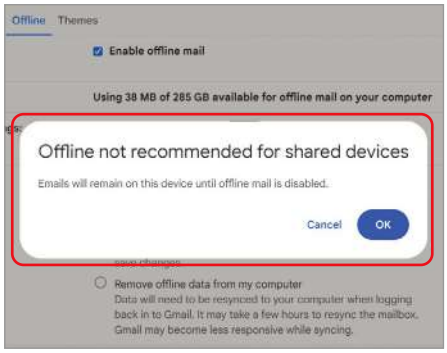
But how much of your inbox do you need? If you've upgraded your Google account through Google One (https://one.google.com) and opted for the Premium plan, your inbox might stretch to 2TB, which is bigger than many hard drives or SSDs. Downloading that much data would not only be time-consuming: in many cases it would be impossible.

Gmail therefore asks how much of your email you'd like to download. The default is 30 days, but you can change this to seven days or 90 days in the dropdown menu next to 'Sync settings'. We think 30 days 2 is a fair compromise for most users, who will probably only be offline for a few hours at a time.

You can save space over the longer term by opting to 'Remove offline data from my computer' in the Security section

below these options. Do this and all your downloaded messages will be deleted when you log out of Gmail (if you don't want this to happen, simply don't log out – close the browser window instead). However, it also means that next time you log into Gmail your computer will have to repeat the potentially time-consuming process of downloading the last seven, 30 or 90 days' worth of messages from your mailbox. We'd therefore recommend taking the alternative option, to 'Keep offline data on my computer' 3.

When you've made the appropriate choices, click Save Changes. Gmail will warn you that offline mode isn't recommended for shared devices (see screenshot below) because anyone else who uses your Windows login will be able to access your Gmail inbox every time they're using your browser.

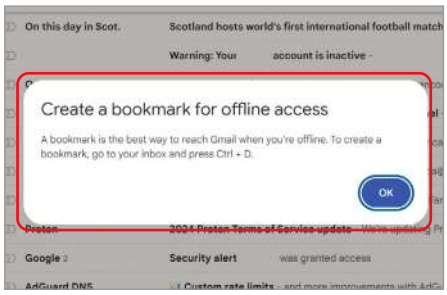

Offline
Themes
Enable offline mail
Using 38 MB of 285 GB available for offline mail on your computer
Offline not recommended for shared devices
Emails will remain on this device until offline mail is disabled.
Cancel
OK
Remove offline data from my computer
Data will need to be resynced to your computer when logging back in to Gmail. It may take a few hours to resync the mailbox. Gmail may become less responsive while syncing.

Gmail will warn you not to use offline mode on a shared device

If you're happy to continue, click OK and Gmail will reload, then advise you to create a bookmark for offline access (see screenshot below). This makes a lot of sense, because if you usually go to Gmail by clicking links from elsewhere, those links will be inaccessible when you're offline. Press Ctrl+D to create a new bookmark, then click OK to dismiss the box that appeared when Gmail reloaded.

In the background, Gmail will now start downloading a copy of your email from the server. Don't immediately go offline as you probably won't have access to all your messages. If possible, give it a few hours to finish setting itself up before first using it.

If you have several Gmail accounts, only the one for which you set up offline mode will be synced to your computer. However, you can repeat the process for any other accounts you have if you need to keep them all updated for use when you lose your network connection.

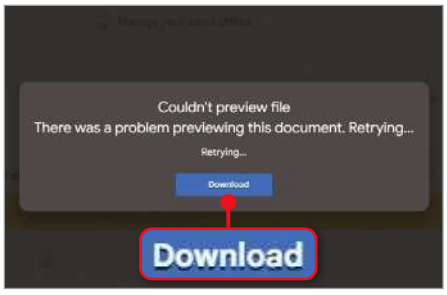

Create a bookmark for offline access
A bookmark is the best way to reach Gmail when you're offline. To create a bookmark, go to your inbox and press Ctrl + D.
OK

Creating a bookmark lets you go straight to your inbox when you're unable to follow links

2 Download attachments from Gmail

Gmail will now be synchronised to the browser that you used to set it up (if you have several browsers on your PC, the others won't have access to your inbox). The next time you're away from your network connection, open the browser you used to set up Gmail and open your inbox by clicking the bookmark you just created. You should now be able to open and read any emails that arrived before you went offline.

Any that have an attachment – like a bill sent as a PDF – will show a thumbnail of the attachment at the bottom of the email, as usual, but you won't be able to open the attachment in the browser. Clicking it will throw up a warning that the file couldn't be previewed, accompanied by a Download button (see screenshot below left). Click the button to save the attachment to your computer.



When you're offline you can download attachments but not view them in your email

When you write a new email or reply to an email in your inbox, clicking send won't immediately dispatch it to the recipient. However, nor will it throw up an error message on account of being offline. Instead, the message will be sent to an Outbox in the sidebar – beside that you'll see a number indicating how many unsent messages it contains. The next time you go online, Gmail will spot the waiting emails and send them.

3 Delete your downloaded inbox

It's quite possible that you'll only want to use offline mode for a short period – for example, during a holiday. In that case, you'll want to remove all the downloaded data from your computer when you get home so you can reclaim the space. This is easy. Make sure you have an internet connection then open the browser you used to set up Gmail's offline mode. Visit www.gmail.com and click the cog icon to open Settings. Click 'See all settings', then click Offline. Untick the box next to 'Enable offline email', then click Save Changes.

4 Manage your Outlook email offline

First of all, it's important to make a distinction between the Outlook software that may be installed on your computer, and the online email service at www.outlook.com, because they work

How I manage my email offline

I only ever access my email through a browser when I'm not on my regular computer. At all other times, I use Thunderbird, which I've installed on my Linux, Windows and macOS machines, or the email software built into my iPad, iPhone and Android devices. The division between my online and offline worlds has therefore become so blurred that I'd be hard-pressed to tell you when I had a live connection and when I didn't. However, after writing this article, I've now turned on offline mode for Gmail on my main work machine, just in case I should ever need a fallback.

Nik Rawlinson

How do you manage your email offline? Please let us know: letters@computeractive.co.uk

very differently.

If you use Outlook (software) to manage your email from either www.outlook.com or another email provider, you can set it up to download copies of your messages to your computer so they're available without a network connection (many programs do this automatically – see box right).

Offline access is automatically enabled in Outlook for Windows, but you can turn it off (and on again) by opening Settings and clicking General, followed by Offline, then clicking the slider next to 'Enable offline email, calendar and people' (1 in our screenshot below).

You can also set which of your online folders Outlook synchronises to your PC and – as with Gmail – how many days' worth of content it synchronises. To do so, first click Settings, followed by General, Offline, then 'Folders to save'.

Now use the 'Folders to save' dropdown menu to select either Default, 'Default and favourites', or 'Default, favourites and recently used' 2. The second of these is the standard option, and the 'Default' folders group includes your inbox, sent folder, drafts, archive, deleted messages, and emails you've snoozed.

Still within the Offline section of Outlook's settings, you can then tap 'Days of email to save', and select seven, 30, 90 or 180. The default is seven. Bear in mind, of course, that the more emails you tell it to store on your local drive, the more space it will consume.

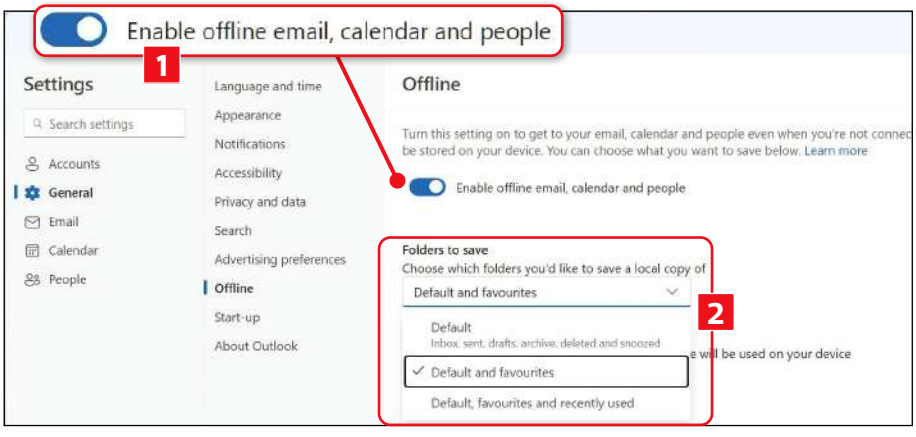
5 Use the Outlook web app offline

If you don't use the installed Outlook software but do log into your mailbox at www.outlook.com to manage an account provided by your school, college or other organisation running Microsoft Exchange Server, you can also set this to work when you have no internet connection.

As with Gmail, you need to be online when you set it up, so it's no good waiting for your broadband to go down before you make any changes. If you think you might need it, act now. Log into your inbox then click the cog at the top right. Now click Options followed by General (or simply click General on the left), then Offline Settings. Tick 'Turn on offline access' and if you see a warning that the website is requesting space on your drive, allow it access.

As with Gmail, you shouldn't enable this kind of offline access if you share your Windows login with someone else because they will be able to view the contents of your email account via the browser.

Once enabled, offline mode gives you browser-based access to the last three days of content in your inbox, drafts and any folders you've accessed within the last few days – up to a maximum of 20 folders in total (18 recent, plus inbox and drafts). Attachments aren't available in offline mode.



Click this slider in Outlook to switch on Offline mode, then select which folders to sync

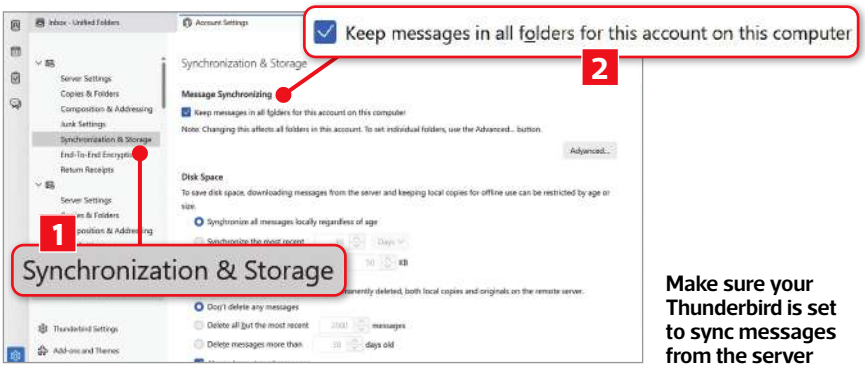
Managing your email using software

When email first went mainstream, we didn't live in an always-on, broadband world. Most home users dialled into the internet a couple of times a day to download new messages and send any that had been written since they'd last gone online. Email programs like Thunderbird and Turnpike were coded specifically to enable this fractured way of working.

Very little has changed. Thunderbird is still with us and has been joined by a wide selection of similar third-party email programs, all of which can be used to download a local copy of any incoming messages, and store outgoing messages until you next go online. This is usually their default way of working, so you don't need to do anything other than install them and provide your login details.

It's still worth checking they are set up to sync messages to local storage, however. To do this in Thunderbird, click the cog in the sidebar to open settings, click Account Settings, then click 'Synchronization & Storage' for the account you want to check (1 in our screenshot). Make sure 'Keep messages in all folders for this account on this computer' is ticked 2.

Email programs built into iOS, iPadOS, and Android devices will usually sync recent messages to their internal storage. However, mobile devices are sometimes set to only download attachments when they are required – not only to save space on the device, but to avoid downloading large amounts of data on a metered connection. If you think you're going to need an attachment when you don't have an internet connection, make sure you download a copy so you already have it to hand.



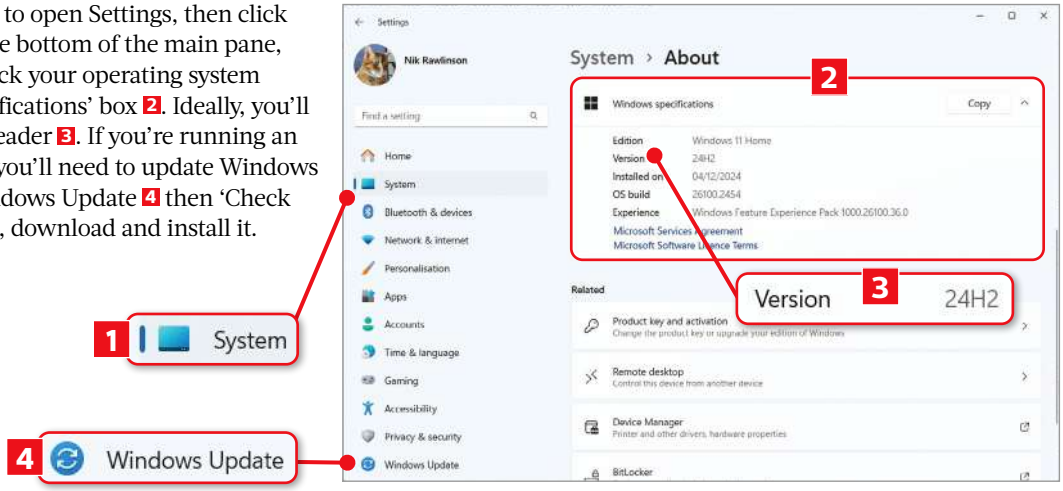
Make sure your Thunderbird is set to sync messages from the server

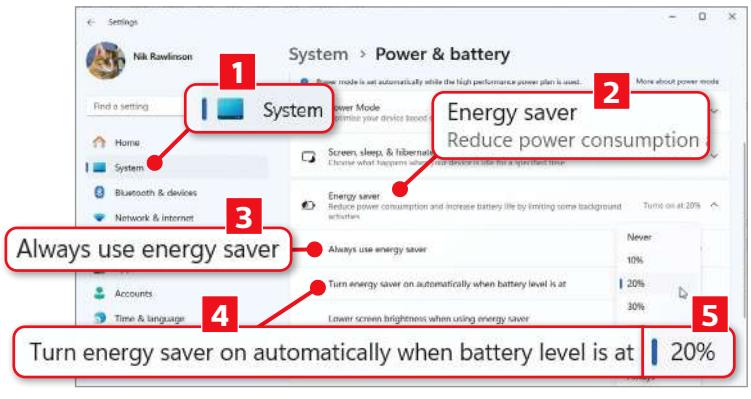
Prolong laptop battery with Windows 11 Energy Saver

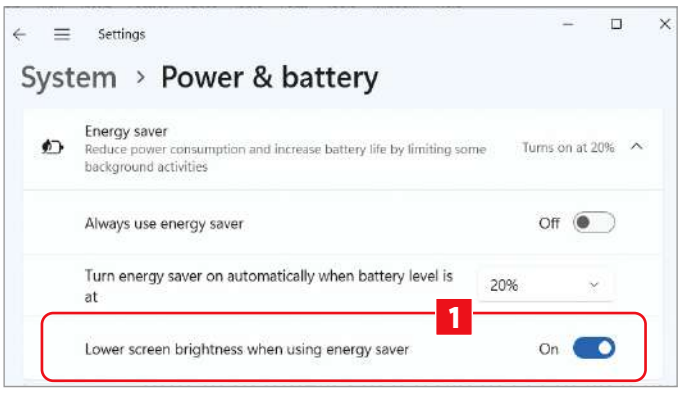
What you need: Windows 11 (24H2)
Time required: 20 minutes

If your laptop battery isn't lasting as long as it should or you're worried that your desktop PC is using more power than you'd like, Windows 11's improved Energy Saver feature might help. It's only available on the latest version of the operating system (24H2), replacing the old Battery Saver tool. Energy Saver lets you control how background processes work, reduce your screen's brightness and set what programs can and can't do when you're not using them. Here, we'll explain how you can use it to get the right balance between performance and energy-usage. We'll also explore Windows' other energy-saving options.

STEP 1 Press Windows key+I to open Settings, then click System 1. Scroll to the bottom of the main pane, click About, then check your operating system version in the 'Windows specifications' box 2. Ideally, you'll see 24H2 beside the Version header 3. If you're running an earlier version, such as 24H1, you'll need to update Windows to use Energy Saver. Click Windows Update 4 then 'Check for updates'. If one is available, download and install it.

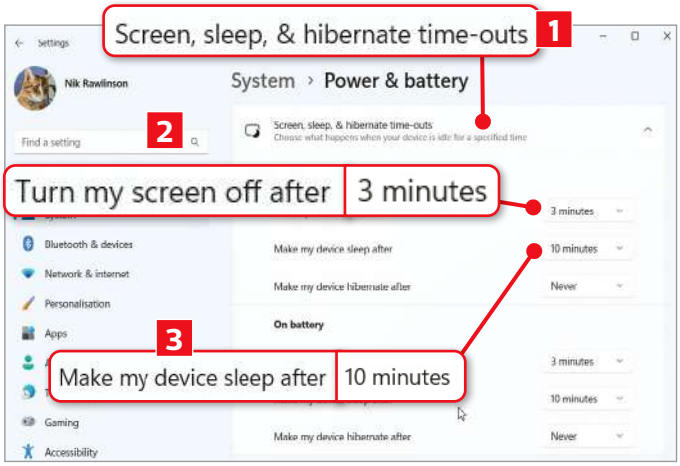




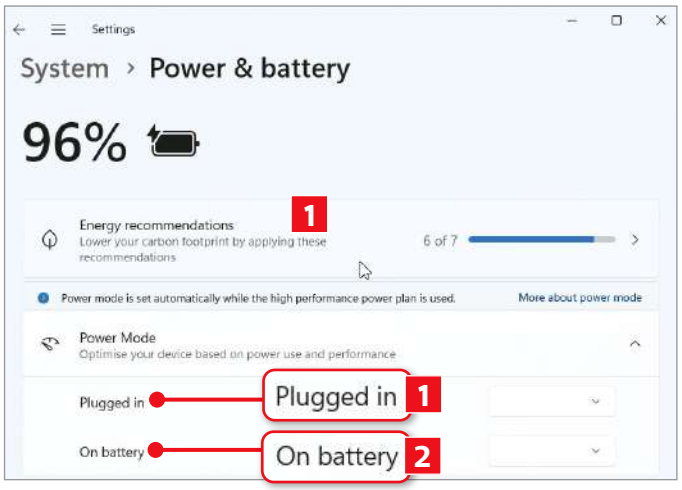

Settings
System › Power & battery
Energy saver
Reduce power consumption and increase battery life by limiting some background activities
Turns on at 20%
Always use energy saver
Off
Turn energy saver on automatically when battery level is at
20%
1
Lower screen brightness when using energy saver
On

STEP 2 Next, click System 1 then click 'Power & battery'. Now click 'Energy saver' 2 to expand that section. You can turn on the slider next to 'Always use energy saver' 3 so that Windows uses the most energy-efficient settings the entire time. Alternatively, use the 'Turn energy saver on automatically when battery level is at...' dropdown menu 4 to specify at which stage these settings should apply. For example, if you have a laptop, you could set it to prioritise performance until the battery was down to, say, 20 per cent 5 (at which point energy-saving would kick in).

STEP 3 One of the most energy-sapping components in a laptop is its screen, which is backlit by a constant light source. Reducing this light's brightness level will prolong battery life. To do so, switch on the 'Lower screen brightness when using energy saver' option 1. If you find this makes it difficult to see your screen in bright sunlight, you can always turn it off again.

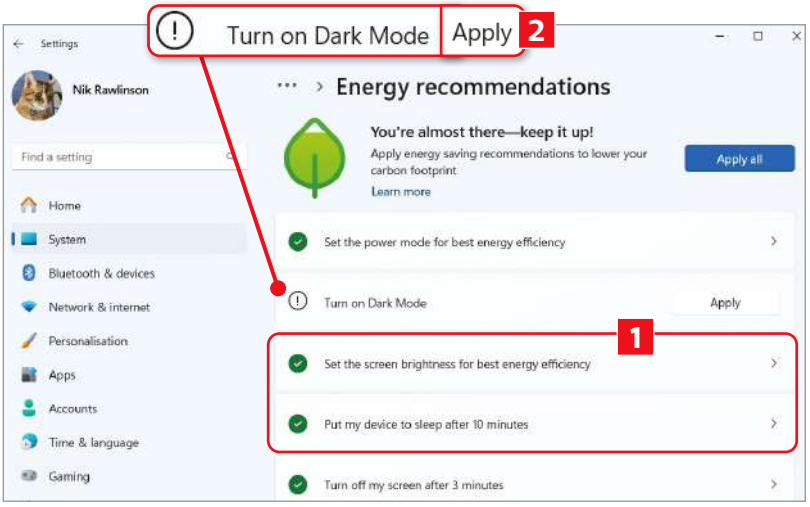


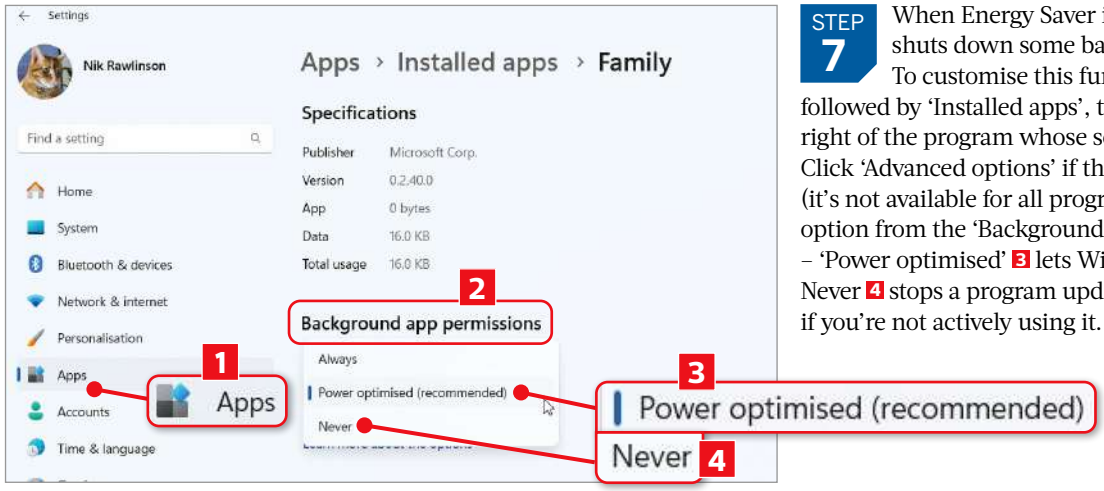
STEP 4 Energy Saver's other benefits – such as improved management of background programs and disabling transparency effects – are automated, so you don't need to turn them on. However, there are other changes you can make to reduce your computer's energy needs. Click 'Screen, sleep, & hibernate time-outs' 1 to open that section, then use the dropdown menus beside 'Turn my screen off after' 2 and 'Make my device sleep after' 3 to reduce the amount of time your PC should be inactive before it shuts down the screen, then goes to sleep.



STEP 5 Scroll up to Power Mode and click the header to open this section. Use the two dropdown menus to specify how Windows should behave when running on mains power 1 or battery 2. Your three options are 'Best power efficiency' (choose this for both if you want to use less energy), Balanced or 'Best performance'. When set to Balanced, Windows will constantly adjust the settings according to what you're doing, while 'Best performance' will always prioritise speed and performance over saving energy.

STEP 6 Towards the top of the 'Power & battery' screen, you'll see the 'Energy recommendations' section. Click this and work your way through the settings to reduce your energy use further. Some of these – such as the sleep and display settings – we turned on in Step 4, which is indicated by the green ticks 1. Other options, such as dark mode 2, can be enabled here.





STEP 7 When Energy Saver is active, Windows shuts down some background processes. To customise this function, click Apps 1, followed by 'Installed apps', then the three dots to the right of the program whose settings you want to adjust. Click 'Advanced options' if that appears on the menu (it's not available for all programs), then choose an option from the 'Background app permissions' menu 2 – 'Power optimised' 3 lets Windows decide, while Never 4 stops a program updating in the background if you're not actively using it.

Readers' Tips

TIP OF THE FORTNIGHT

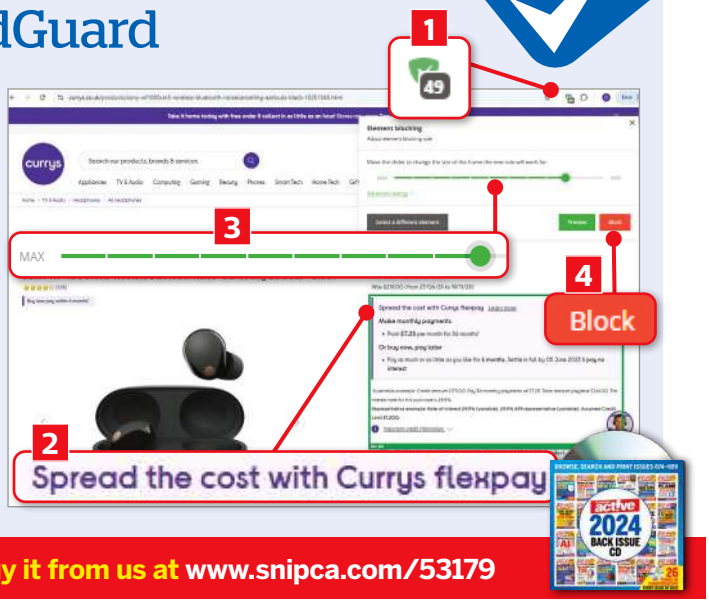
Block website clutter using AdGuard

I've been using AdGuard (www.snipca.com/52253) to block adverts ever since I read about it in Issue 695 (page 38). I find it more effective than any other ad-blocker. But what I love is how it can also remove other annoying clutter from web pages.

First, click AdGuard's icon (1 in our screenshot) then 'Block ads manually'. Move your cursor over the page and you'll see page 'elements' (boxes, icons and so on) highlighted in green. Click an element you want to block. I hate those 'pay monthly' offers on shopping sites, so I always block those 2. You can then move the green slider 3 to make the blocked area bigger if you want.

Click 'Preview' to see what the page would look like without this element, or Block if you're happy to proceed 4. It will disappear, and should also vanish from other pages on that site.

Darren Ashby



Darren wins a copy of our 2024 Back Issue CD

Buy it from us at www.snipca.com/53179

EXTENSION

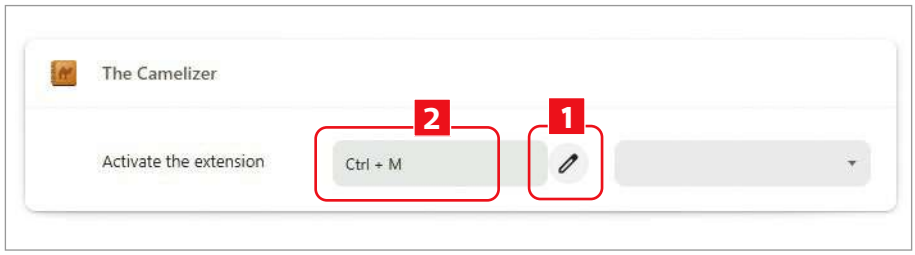
Make Camelizer shortcut easier to press

I've given up booze, fags, biscuits and many other things that make life worth living, so my New Year's resolutions are less exciting these days. One of them is to change my favourite three-key shortcuts to two. Stretching across the keyboard to perform some of those three-key shortcuts requires double-jointed fingers and thumbs.

I was reminded of this when I read your recommendation of The Camelizer extension (Issue 698, page 43, www.snipca.com/53148). I use this all the time to find bargains on Amazon. When visiting a product page, you can press Alt+Shift+C to see how prices have changed. My fingers can't manage that awkward shortcut, however, so I've changed it to an easier two-key version.

Click the Camelizer icon followed by the Settings cog on the left. Now click the blue link under Camelizer Keyboard Shortcut, which will take you to your browser's settings. Find the extension then click the Edit pen icon (1 in our screenshot below left) and press the shortcut you want. I've chosen Ctrl+M 2, which doesn't seem to be in use by anything else. Now I can press Ctrl easily with my left hand and M with my right.

Len Connors



WEBSITE

Save and download favourite BBC sound effects

I love browsing the BBC's Sound Effects library (www.snipca.com/52831), which you mentioned in Issue 698's round up of 2025's best free downloads (page 57). There's so much choice that it's hard to know where to start. As I explore the site, I click the heart

Why I stopped using...

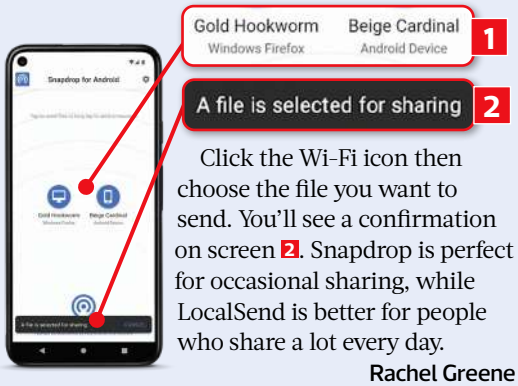
LocalSend

I used LocalSend for a few days after reading your review in Issue 697 (page 18). It's certainly a powerful and well-designed tool, but my motto is never to download something if there's an online alternative.

And what I use instead...

I find it much easier to use **Snapdrop** (https://snapdrop.net), which works entirely online. Visit the site on one device (PC, phone or tablet) and do the same on another.

If the devices are on the same network, they will recognise each other – as indicated by the two names that appear on their screens. LocalSend uses fruit and vegetables as a theme for names, but Snapdrop uses animals (1 in screenshot). On the device you're sending the file from, select the name of the device that will receive the file.



Click the Wi-Fi icon then choose the file you want to send. You'll see a confirmation on screen 2. Snapdrop is perfect for occasional sharing, while LocalSend is better for people who share a lot every day.

Rachel Greene

Tell us why you stopped using a website, app or program: letters@computeractive.co.uk

Handy hints and tips from your fellow readers

Email us your tips: letters@computeractive.co.uk

icon (1 in screenshot above) beside clips I like to create a list of favourites. I can then play them to decide which I prefer. I remove those I don't want, then click 'Download all favourites' 2. I use these to create audio stories for my grandchildren.

One thing I haven't worked out is how to create folders for different types of favourites. I suspect it's not possible. Can anyone confirm this?

Mo Saunders

Reader recommends...

iPhone 16 Pro

£999 from www.snipca.com/53084

I've owned various smartphones over the years, starting with my HTC Wildfire in 2010. They've all been mid-range devices, and until recently I'd never had an iPhone.

A few years ago I bought an iPad and found it extremely useful – certainly not the culture shock I'd expected. So when thinking about replacing my then-current Huawei Mate 20 Lite phone, I considered an iPhone.

I like taking photos but never seem to have my camera with me when I need it. So I wanted a phone that's good for photography. Looking at what was available (and steering away from Google) the iPhone seemed ideal.

It has a 5x zoom, which is excellent, and I attended a brilliant free photo session at my local Apple shop. I'm very pleased with my choice. It's not cheap, but it's a pleasure to own.

Hugh Tattersall

Want to recommend hardware or software to fellow readers?
Email letters@computeractive.co.uk

BROWSER

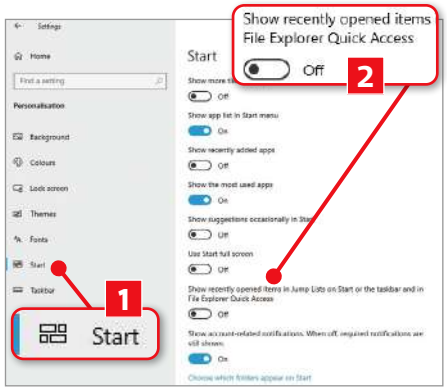
Stop Brave showing recently visited websites

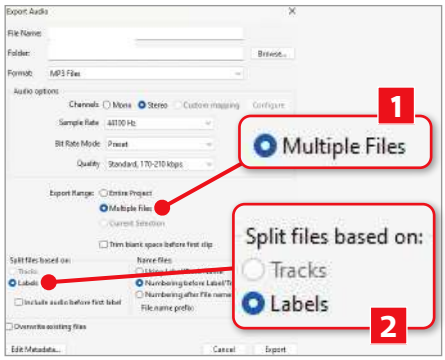
Brave claims its browser "offers the best of all worlds: security, privacy, and performance", but if you close it then right-click its taskbar icon, it shows a 'recently closed' list of websites you've visited. This seems to happen even if you've set the browser to clear everything on exit.

I see this as a serious security flaw, but you can fix it in Windows Settings. Press Windows key+I to open Settings, then click Personalisation. Next click Start on the left (1 in our screenshot below) then turn off the slider next to 'Show recently opened items...' 2.

Incidentally, in the past few months I've been trying out the Mullvad browser (https://mullvad.net/en) with a view to replacing Brave. It's relatively new and doesn't have a strong following at the moment, but I'm interested to see how it develops.

John Parry





SOFTWARE

Add Audacity labels to make songs easy to identify

In response to previous queries about converting records and tapes to digital files, there's a trick in Audacity (www.audacityteam.org) that makes it easier. You can use its 'Add label' feature on the master track to identify, say, Song 1, Song 2 and so on. Then go to 'Export Audio', select Multiple Files (1 in our screenshot above) then split the files based on your labels 2. You can then choose how to name the files, and Audacity will export each labelled section as an individual track. This means you don't have to cut and paste sections.

Morvyn Finch

APP

Turn your phone number into a widget

I've had the same mobile number for 15 years but for some reason I can never remember it. When asked to provide it I have to dive into my phone's Contacts list and scroll through in a panic looking for my own details while somebody drums their fingers on the counter or smiles in resignation.

I wanted a quick way to locate my number on my iPhone and eventually came up with this method. Find a photo on your phone that has a plain or neutral background and trim it into a square. Now use the phone's Edit function to open 'Mark Up' then tap 'Add Text' to add your mobile number across the picture in bold clear text (1 in our screenshot below).

Download the free app Widgetsmith (www.snipca.com/53133), then select 'Home Screen' and 'Photo' to turn this photo into a widget for your home screen 2. Bingo! Your phone number is now clearly displayed on your phone's home screen. Widgetsmith is for iPhones only, but similar apps are available on Android – or if you have a Google Pixel phone, you can simply create a widget for Contacts if you prefer.

Roger Peacock

Browser Tips

CHROME

Combine the New Tab and Tab Search buttons

The New Tab button is one of the most important options in any browser. Without it, you'd either need to open every new web page in a new window, or rely on the keyboard shortcut Ctrl+T.

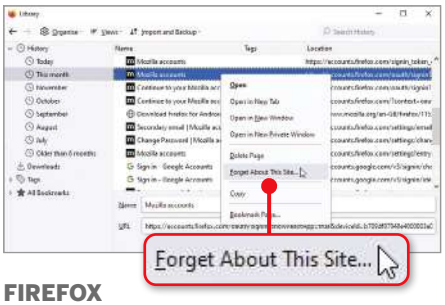
In contrast, the Tab Search button, which Chrome tucks away in its top-left corner, is easy to overlook. That's a shame because it provides a useful way to list all your open and recently closed tabs, as well as search their titles and URLs to find specific web pages.

To address this discrepancy, Google is trying an experiment that combines the New Tab and Tab Search options into a single 'combo' button. This means you're more likely to use Tab Search, but also increases the risk of clicking it accidentally when you want to open a new tab.

The experiment is available in Chrome 132, released on 14 January (so might not be there yet if you're reading an early subscription copy of this issue). To try it, type chrome://flags into the browser's address bar and press Enter to load the Experiments page.

Find the experiment Tabstrip Combo Button (1 in our screenshot below), then select Enabled in its dropdown menu 2 and relaunch Chrome. You'll now see the new combo button next to your active tab 3. The 'New tab' option is on the left and 'Search tabs' on the right.

To separate the buttons again, go back to the Experiments page and choose Default or Disabled in the dropdown menu for Tabstrip Combo Button.



FIREFOX

Delete all traces of a site from your history

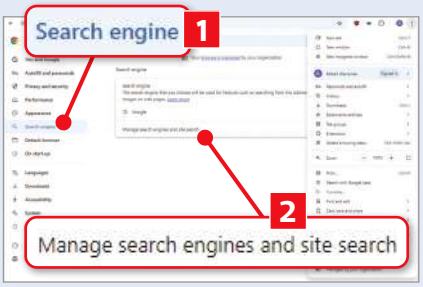
All browsers let you delete specific entries from your browsing history, to prevent nosy parkers from seeing you visited those websites. But if you viewed several pages on a site over a long period of time, and want to keep the details private, the deletion process isn't as simple – unless you clear your entire history.

You can either scroll through your history and remove those pages individually, or type the name or domain of the site into the History search box to filter and delete matching entries. Firefox offers a much easier method that deletes all pages from a specific site from your history in one go, along with cookies and cached data.

Click the three-line menu button in the top-right corner of the browser and choose History, then Manage History – or press Ctrl+Shift+H on your keyboard. When the Library window opens, find a page from the site you want to remove from your history.

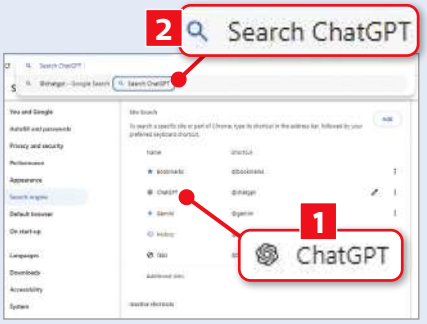
Right-click its entry and select Forget About This Site (see screenshot above). Click 'Forget' to confirm and Firefox will

WORKSHOP Add ChatGPT to Chrome's search options



1 Click the three-dot menu in Chrome's top-right corner and choose Settings then 'Search engine' 1 – or just go straight to chrome://settings/search. Click 'Manage search engines and site search' 2 under the name of your default search engine.

2 Click the Add button next to Site Search and type ChatGPT in the Name box 1. Enter @chatgpt in the Shortcut box 2 and https://chatgpt.com/?q=%s&hints=search in the URL box 3 – you can copy these details from our Pastebin account at www.snipca.com/53356.



3 Click 'Add' to save the details, and ChatGPT will be added to your list of Site Search options 1. Now, when you type the shortcut @chatgpt in Chrome's address bar and press Space, the browser will switch to that search tool 2.

BEST EXTENSION FOR... Telling sites not to track you

OptMeowt
Chromium
www.snipca.com/53353
As we reported in Issue 700 (page 7), Mozilla will soon ditch the ineffective 'Do Not Track' request from Firefox in favour of Global Privacy Control (GPC). This also asks participating websites not to share or sell your data, but carries more legal weight than Do Not Track. Brave and DuckDuckGo also support GPC, but Chrome, Edge and other Chromium browsers don't, which is where OptMeowt comes in.

This extension sends the GPC signal to websites when you switch on its Do Not Sell Enabled option (see screenshot). It also tells you which domains have received the signal, so you can see the servers that track your data in the background, and whether they've responded. Additionally, OptMeowt opts you out of Google's Topics feature, which was originally intended to replace third-party cookies.

If you don't like that, try...

GPC Enabler
Chromium
www.snipca.com/53354
This extension also sends a Global Privacy Control signal towebsites, but works entirely in the background.

delete all data relating to that website, including the pages you viewed, cookies it implanted, cached images and content preferences.

It won't remove your bookmarks or password for the site, or stop it being added to your history in future.

EDGE

Display widgets on your New Tab page

In Issue 700 (page 42), we explained how to customise your MSN (formerly Start) feed on Edge's New Tab page, to make it show more relevant content. Since then, Microsoft has added a new option that displays widgets on the New Tab page, rather than the full MSN experience.

Similar to the Dashboard feature recently introduced by Vivaldi (see Issue 699, page 42), these widgets show you useful information including the weather forecast and traffic updates for your detected location. You can either use them in tandem with your MSN feed (in which case they'll be positioned above the feed) or instead of it.

To activate widgets in Edge, click the 'Page settings' cog in the top-right corner of a New Tab page, and switch on the new 'Show widgets' option (1 in our screenshot below left) – this will also enable 'Show content'. Switch off 'Show feed' if you don't want to see MSN content.

Between two and four widgets will now appear on the page, containing links you can click for more information. Click the three-dot icon in the corner of a widget to hide it or personalise its content, or click 'Manage widgets' 2 to choose new widgets to display.

CHROMIUM

Search the web using ChatGPT

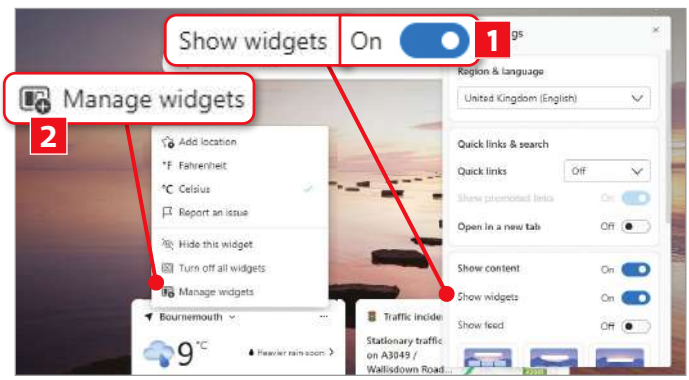
'Will ChatGPT's search tool kill Google?', we asked in our 'Question of the Fortnight' in Issue 700 (page 10). We'll be taking a closer look at that topic in our Cover Feature in Issue 702 (on sale 29 January), but in the meantime you can add the new AI-powered search engine to Chrome and other Chromium browsers.

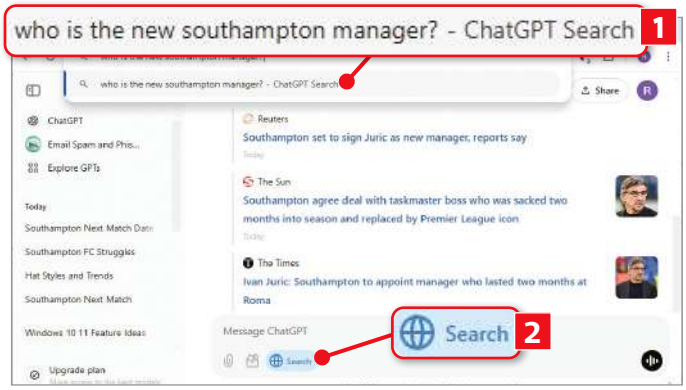
The official ChatGPT Search extension (www.snipca.com/53351) sets ChatGPT as your browser's default search engine. Type a search query in the address bar (1 in our screenshot below) and press Enter to open the answer in a new ChatGPT tab (you'll need to be signed into your free OpenAI account).

ChatGPT will automatically search the web based on what you ask. If its initial results don't provide relevant and recent information from cited online sources, you can search again manually by clicking the Search button 2.

To search with Google instead of ChatGPT, type !g into your address bar before your search query. You can restore your previous search engine by disabling or uninstalling the extension.

Alternatively, keep your current search engine and add ChatGPT to Chrome's list of search options – see our Workshop opposite to learn how.




who is the new southampton manager? - ChatGPT Search
1
Share
ChatGPT
Email Spam and Phis...
Explore GPTs
Reuters
Southampton set to sign Juric as new manager, reports say
The Sun
Southampton agree deal with taskmaster boss who was sacked two months into season and replaced by Premier League icon
The Times
Ivan Juric: Southampton to appoint manager who lasted two months at Roma
Message ChatGPT
Search
2
Upgrade plan

Phone and Tablet Tips

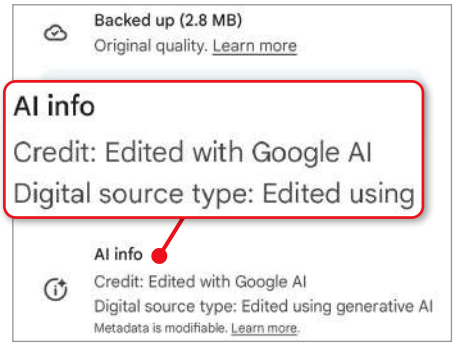
ANDROID & iOS

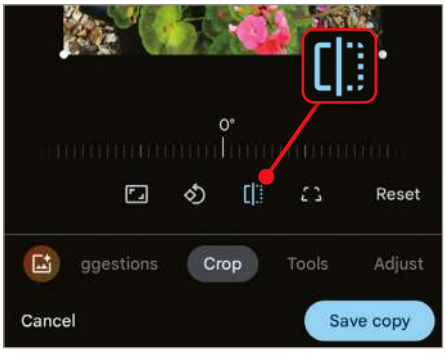
Check if photos were edited using AI

Over the past year, Google Photos has added several AI tools to its mobile app. These include Magic Eraser, which deletes unwanted people from shots, and Magic Editor, which moves and resizes elements, and adjusts the background and lighting.

The results achieved by these tools are so impressive you may have forgotten you used AI to edit a photo – or fail to spot when a picture someone shares with you has been enhanced with AI. To improve transparency, and to comply with its own 'AI principles' (www.snipca.com/53221), Google now tells you when AI edits have been applied in Google Photos.

Swipe up on an image to see its Details panel and, if it has been AI-enhanced, you'll see a new 'AI info' section below the 'Backed up' details (see screenshot below). This will include the information: 'Credit: Edited with Google AI' and 'Digital source type: Edited using generative AI'.


Backed up (2.8 MB)
Original quality. Learn more
AI info
Credit: Edited with Google AI
Digital source type: Edited using
AI info
Credit: Edited with Google AI
Digital source type: Edited using generative AI
Metadata is modifiable. Learn more.



Another addition to Google Photos has nothing to do with AI, but is arguably just as useful. It lets you flip photos with a single tap, so that left-facing subjects look right instead – and vice versa.

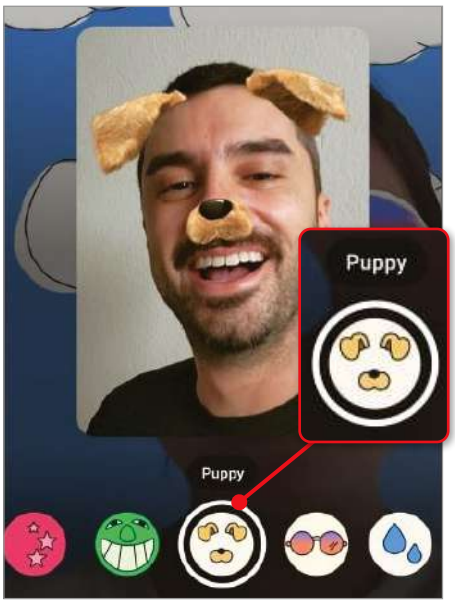
Press the Edit button below a picture, choose Crop and tap the new Flip icon (to the right of Rotate – see screenshot above). Your photo will instantly be flipped – tap the icon again to undo.

ANDROID & iOS

Enhance your video calls in WhatsApp

In Issue 700 (page 44), we wrote about the improved video-call features in Facebook Messenger. The messaging app's Meta stablemate, WhatsApp, has now been updated with its own video-calling enhancements.

Like Messenger, WhatsApp now supports high-resolution video calls, provided all participants in a chat have a fast enough internet connection. The picture quality will be upgraded automatically, so you don't need to tweak any settings.



It has also added 10 new video effects to make your chats more interesting and fun. Tap the Effects (magic wand) icon in the top-right corner and choose from filters including Puppy (which gives you a dog nose and ears – pictured above), Underwater and Karaoke (which places a microphone in front of you).

Additionally, WhatsApp now lets you start a video call with selected members of a group chat, rather than bothering everyone. Tap the camera button to start a video chat, choose the people you want to talk to and press 'Call

BEST NEW APPS What you should install this fortnight

PeerTube

Free

Android www.snipca.com/53226
iOS www.snipca.com/53227

PeerTube is an open-source, non-profit alternative to YouTube, which lets you watch videos from hundreds of independent services without any ads or tracking. Its new mobile app invites you to specify your interests to discover relevant content, or you can simply browse videos in its Explore feed and search for them by subject.

TPTV Encore

Free

iOS www.snipca.com/53228

Talking Pictures TV has been showing classic British series and films on its Freeview channel since 2018. Its new app lets you watch its vintage programmes on demand on your iPhone or iPad, and on Google/Android TV and Fire TV devices. It's not yet available for Android phones and tablets, and doesn't offer live streaming.

ReSubs

Free*

Android www.snipca.com/53264

This app helps you keep track of all your subscriptions, so you always know when the next payments are due and can budget accordingly. Choose from its catalogue of subscription services, and add your own, then organise them into categories and enable reminders. Pay 99p a month to remove ads and view "subscription trends".

*Contains in-app purchases

[number] of people selected'.

The new features are rolling out gradually, so you may not have them all yet.

ANDROID & iOS

Report police sightings in Google Maps

Google Maps has removed its feature for reporting speed traps on your route, and replaced it with a more generic option for reporting sightings of the police. This feature has long been available in Google's other navigation app, Waze, and allows you to alert other drivers to the presence of law-enforcement officers on or at the side of the road.

Some users will miss the more specific 'Speed traps' option, but the new one covers more reasons for the police to be monitoring traffic. For example, they may be dealing with an accident or emergency, checking or rerouting vehicles, or investigating criminal activity.

To share your sighting of the boys in blue, tap the Report button while viewing your route in Google Maps' navigation mode. Select 'Police' (see screenshot above) and once your report has been verified by Google, a marker will be added to the map.

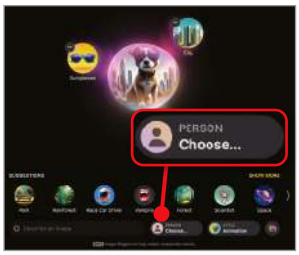
iOS/iPadOS

Create your own images using Apple's new AI tools

In December, Apple gave many iPhone and iPad users an early Christmas present by introducing a slew of new AI features through its iOS 18.2 update. The 'AI' stands for Apple Intelligence as well as artificial intelligence, and requires an iPhone 15 Pro or later, or an iPad with an A17 Pro or M1 processor.

Sadly, this rules out devices from before 2021, but if you own a compatible model, there are lots of new tools to try. One of the most interesting is Image Playground, which uses AI to generate images from text prompts and using photos in your library. It's available as a dedicated app, and is also integrated with iOS tools such as Messages and Notes.

To try Image Playground on a supported iPhone or iPad, make sure you've upgraded to iOS 18.2, then open the new Image Playground app from your Home screen or App Library. It can also be installed from the Apple App Store (www.snipca.com/53251) on compatible devices.



Select either Animation or Illustration as your visual style. Each option offers different visual approaches – Animation produces more playful and cartoon-like results, while Illustration creates more detailed and artistic images. You can also choose from a variety of themes, including Adventure, Fantasy and Starry Night.

Type a detailed description of the image you want to create, and Image Playground will work its AI magic. Alternatively, tap the Person button (see screenshot left) to generate an image using a photo of someone (they must be labelled with their name in the Photos app). Tap the plus sign (on iPhone) or photos button (on iPad) and select Choose Photo or Take Photo to use a picture of something else. Tap 'Done' to save the result.

BEST APPS FOR... Amateur astronomers

Stellarium Mobile

Free*
Android www.snipca.com/53252
iOS www.snipca.com/53253
Stellarium detects your location to identify all the celestial objects visible in your local night sky. These include stars, constellations, planets and passing satellites. Tap an object to learn more about it, and switch between different 'sky cultures' including Chinese, Norse and Inuit. Pay £19.99 to unlock Stellarium's advanced tools.
Best For Exploring the night sky

NASA

Free
Android www.snipca.com/53265
iOS www.snipca.com/53266
NASA's much-improved app is packed with space-related news, photos, videos and podcasts, and information about its past missions and upcoming events. You can find out when and where to look out for the ISS, view live footage from the station and watch interesting documentaries on the ad-free NASA+ streaming service.
Best For Space news and videos

Ouranos

Free*
Android www.snipca.com/53255
iOS www.snipca.com/53254
Avoid astronomical disappointment by using Ouranos to plan your stargazing excursions (even just to the back garden). It tells you whether tonight will be good or bad for visibility, based on cloud cover, moon phase and other meteorological conditions.
Best For Stargazing forecasts

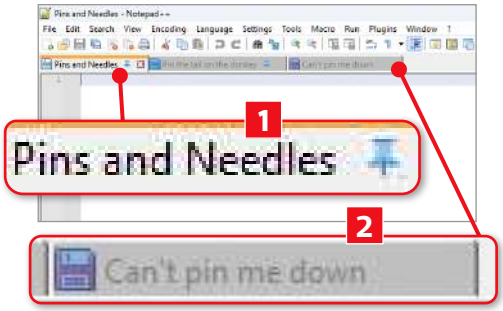
*Contains in-app purchases

WINDOWS 10 & 11

Pin your tabs in Notepad alternative

If you find Notepad in Windows too basic for your needs, replace it with Notepad++, which has more advanced tools and features. The latest version (8.7.2) lets you pin your tabs at the far left of the top bar, making them easy to open with one click.

First, download Notepad++ by clicking the green button at www.snipca.com/53206 (avoid fake 'download' buttons which are just adverts). Now click the pin icon in a tab and it'll turn blue, indicating it's been pinned (1 in our screenshot below). Unpinned tabs will always be to the right of these 2.



WINDOWS 10 & 11

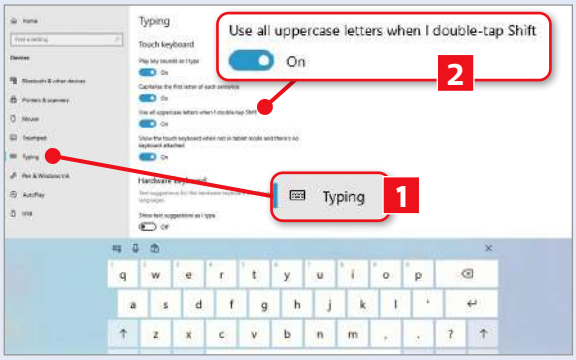
Type uppercase on touchscreen keyboard using Shift

If you occasionally need to type in capital (uppercase) letters on a physical keyboard but don't want to keep turning Caps Lock on and off, you can do so by pressing down the Shift key as you type. They'll return to lowercase when you release the Shift key.

On touchscreen keyboards in Windows 10 you can press Shift to see uppercase letters, but these disappear after you type a single letter. You can instead double-press Shift to keep typing in uppercase, but you first need to activate a setting.

To do so, press Windows key+I to open Settings then click Devices. Now click Typing on the left (1 in our screenshot), then scroll down to the 'Touch keyboard' heading and switch on 'Use all uppercase letters when I double-tap Shift' 2. This keeps uppercase letters selected until you tap Shift again.

This option is turned on by default in Windows 11 touchscreens, so there's no setting to activate.



WINDOWS 11

Revert your PC's time to old format

Microsoft recently changed how the time and date appears in Windows 11's system tray, at the far right of the taskbar. For the date, only the day and month are now shown (for example, 03/25). For the time, only the hour and minute is shown, with AM and PM removed.

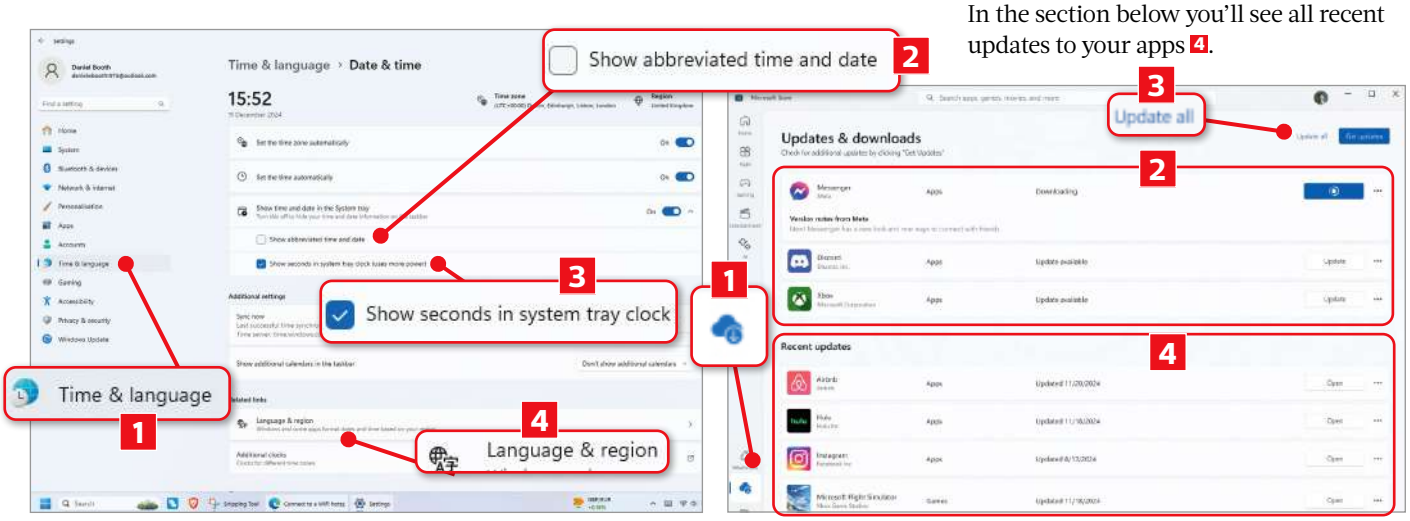
This is Microsoft's new default but you can revert to the previous format. Press Windows key+I to open Settings, then click 'Time & language' on the left (1 in our screenshot below left). Now click 'Date & time' followed by the 'Show time and date in the System tray' dropdown menu. Untick 'Show abbreviated time and date' 2 and tick 'Show seconds in system tray clock' 3 (though note that this uses more power). The change will take place straight away.

If you don't see AM/PM, click 'Language & region' 4 then Regional format'. Click 'Change formats' then pick a 'Short time' and 'Long time' that shows AM/PM.

WINDOWS 10 & 11

See updates and downloads in Microsoft Store

There's a new 'Updates and downloads' page on the Microsoft Store to make it easier to see your recent downloads and pending updates. Open the Store app on your computer then click the cloud/download icon at the bottom left (1 in our screenshot below). You'll see pending updates at the top 2, with 'version notes' explaining what's new. Click 'Update all' 3 to install them. In the section below you'll see all recent updates to your apps 4.



MICROSOFT WORD

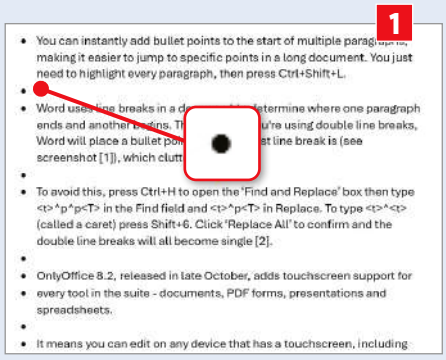
Instantly add bullet points to indicate paragraphs

You can instantly add bullet points to the start of multiple paragraphs, making it easier to jump to specific points in a long document. You simply need to highlight every paragraph, then press Ctrl+Shift+L.

Word uses line breaks in a document to determine where one paragraph ends and another begins. That means if you're using double line breaks, Word will place a bullet point where the first line break is (see screenshot 1), which clutters the page.

To avoid this, press Ctrl+H to open the 'Find and Replace' box then type ^p^p in the Find field and ^p in Replace. To type ^ (called a caret) press Shift+^.

Click 'Replace All' to confirm and the double line breaks will all become single 2.


1
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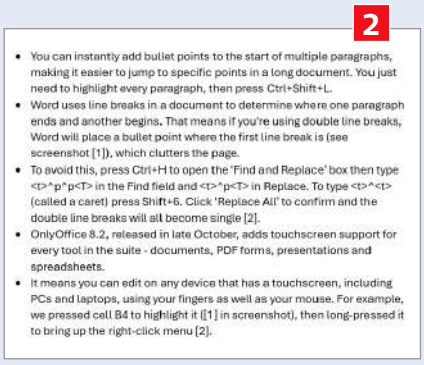
To avoid this, press Ctrl+H to open the 'Find and Replace' box then type <t>^p^p<T> in the Find field and <t>^p<T> in Replace. To type <t>^<t> (called a caret) press Shift+6. Click 'Replace All' to confirm and the double line breaks will all become single [2].
OnlyOffice 8.2, released in late October, adds touchscreen support for every tool in the suite - documents, PDF forms, presentations and spreadsheets.
It means you can edit on any device that has a touchscreen, including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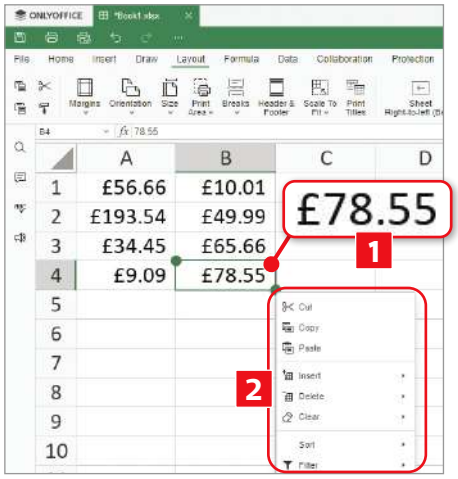
OnlyOffice 8.2, released in late October, adds touchscreen support for every tool in the suite - documents, PDF forms, presentations and spreadsheets.
It means you can edit on any device that has a touchscreen, including PCs and laptops, using your fingers as well as your mouse. For example, we pressed cell B4 to highlight it ([1] in screenshot), then long-pressed it to bring up the right-click menu [2].



ONLYOFFICE

Edit tools using a touchscreen

OnlyOffice 8.2, released in late October, adds touchscreen support for every tool in the suite – documents, PDF forms, presentations and spreadsheets. It means you can edit on any device that has a touchscreen, including PCs and laptops, using your fingers as well as your mouse.

For example, we pressed cell B4 to highlight it (1 in our screenshot above), then long-pressed it to bring up the right-click menu 2.

LIBREOFFICE CALC

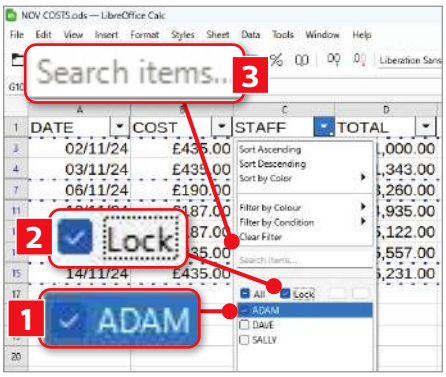
Lock your search filters in spreadsheets

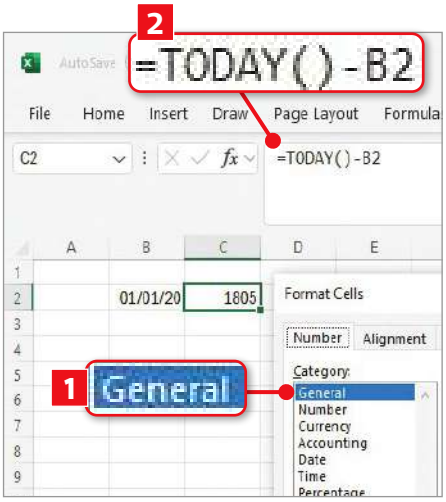
The latest version of LibreOffice Calc (24.8) adds a Lock option when using AutoFilter, which keeps your search filter activated when you search your spreadsheet. This stops any subsequent search you make overriding the filter you chose.

First, select the cells you want to add filters to, including the headers. Go to Data in the menu and choose AutoFilter. Now, click Data then AutoFilter (or press Ctrl+Shift+L). Small dropdown arrows will appear next to each column header. Click these arrows to filter your data based on criteria such as ascending/descending order, background colour, or cell content.

In our example, showing expenses for staff costs, we've chosen to filter the spreadsheet so it only shows results for Adam (1 in our screenshot below), hiding those for Dave and Sally. We then click OK. If we now tick 'Lock' 2, anything we search for in the box above 3 will apply only to the cells as we've just filtered them.

So, if we then clicked the Cost dropdown arrow and searched for £435, it would show us only instances of Adam being paid that amount, not any other. Nor would it show an instance of Dave or Sally also earning that amount.





LIBREOFFICE CALC & MICROSOFT EXCEL

Calculate how many days have passed since a date

You can use the TODAY function to work out how many days have passed since a specific date. Click the cell where you want the result to appear, then type =TODAY()-XX, replacing XX with the cell containing the date. In our example, we typed =TODAY()-B2 (1 in our screenshot above).

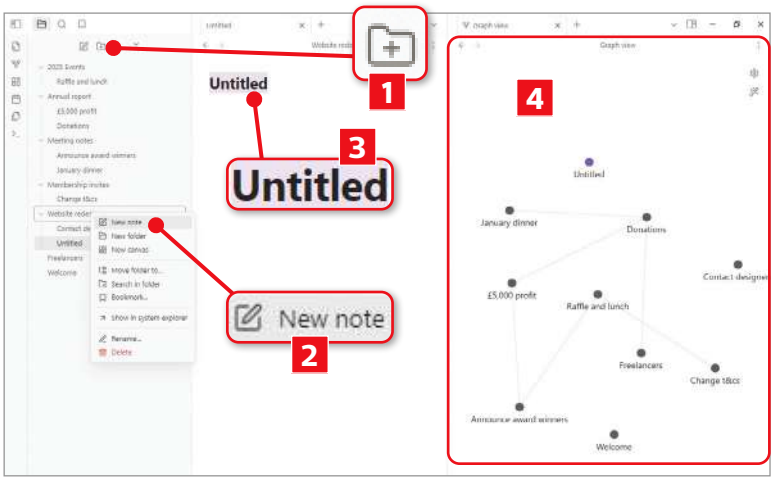
If your result is another date rather than a number, you need to change how Calc or Excel handles dates. Right-click the cell with the formula, then choose Format Cells followed by the Number tab. In Excel, select General in the Category menu 2 followed by OK. In Calc, select Number followed by General, then OK. Alternatively, in either type =TEXT(TODAY()-XX, "0").

In The Club

Run a club or society? Here's how your tech can make it easier

Create and share a digital notebook

Sharing a physical notebook with club members would be impractical, but there are plenty of programs that let you create and send digital notebooks. One of the best is Obsidian, which offers enough clever tools in its free version to make it a real asset to your club. We'll explain how to write and link notes, then categorise them using tags.



Create a note, name it, then see it in Graph view

Set up folders and add notes

First, download it from https://obsidian.md, then launch it and click the purple Create button to create a new vault (Obsidian's name for a notebook). This acts as your main notebook. Type a name for your notebook then click Browse and choose somewhere on your computer to save its files. Next, click Create again and a Welcome page will open. Delete the text from it, then start adding your own.

Now you can create folders for your club. Click the 'New folder' icon (1 in our screenshot above right) then type a name. Next, right-click a folder then select 'New note' 2 and type a name for it in the main pane where it says Untitled 3.

As you add notes, they will appear on the right in a 'Graph view' 4, which shows how your notes are linked. Linking notes lets you switch between them easily without having to search.

To link one note to another, type [[XXXX]] (1 in our screenshot below), replacing XXXX with the name of the note you want to link to – or select one from the dropdown menu 2. Now press Enter, and Obsidian will turn what you've just typed into a clickable link.

Add tags and share your notebook

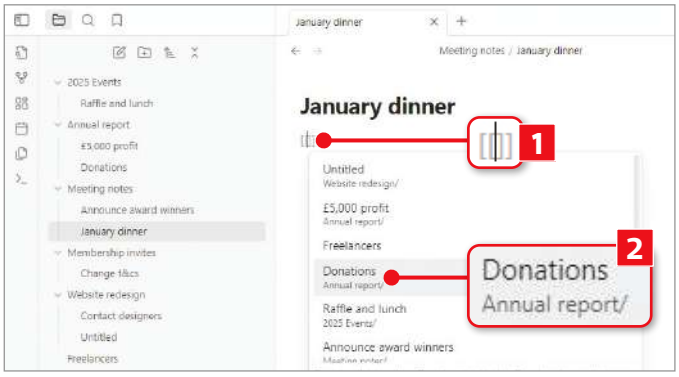
You can also categorise your notes by tagging them with keywords. Place your cursor where you want the tag to appear, then type it preceded by a hashtag, for example #event. To search for a hashtag, click the magnifying glass icon at the top left. Obsidian will show all notes that contain it.

Another way to categorise your notes is to bookmark them. Click the 'Bookmark the active tab' icon (1 in our screenshot below right) then give it a title 2. You can click the Bookmarks icon at the top left 3 to see all your bookmarks. There's also an icon for creating groups of bookmarks 4.

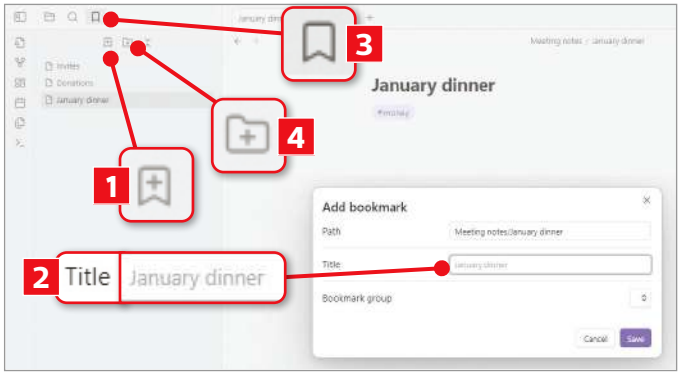
If you wanted to share your notebook through Obsidian, you'd need to upgrade to the 'Commercial' version, which costs $50 (about £30) per user per year (https://obsidian.md/pricing). Thankfully, you can also share it for free through Apple iCloud, Google Drive or OneDrive.

To share your notebook, find the folder for your Obsidian vault on your PC (this contains all your notes and files). If you can't find it, launch Obsidian and check its location at the top left of the program's home page, under the name you chose for your notebook. Alternatively, open the Start menu, right-click Obsidian and select 'Open file location'. Now drag and drop the folder into your cloud-storage folder on your PC.

Once the storage service has uploaded the folder, you can give other people access to it. If someone makes a change to a notebook, you'll need to upload the updated version to the cloud so others can download it.



Linking notes makes them easier to find and open



You can categorise your notes by bookmarking them

Next issue: Create a timeline for volunteer tasks

What's All the Fuss About...

Google's dashcam data

It's using footage from some devices to update Google Maps

What is it?

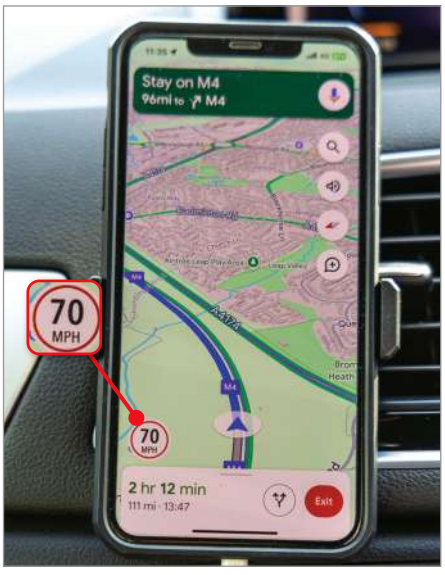
Google has said it routinely collects "short, silent" footage from dashboard cameras (dashcams) in cars for use with its mapping services (see www.snipca.com/53272).

Google's spying on us again, then?

It's an understandable conclusion to come to. After all, Google doesn't exactly have the best track record at respecting your location privacy, as we explained in our recent 'Stop Google Maps spying on you' feature (Issue 696, page 62 – buy a back issue from www.snipca.com/53285). However, Google explains that it's not collecting dashcam footage from the general public.

So where is it getting the footage?

From official business 'partners', specifically Geopost and Nextbase. You may know the latter – it's a Reading-based maker of affordable dashcams you'll find at Amazon, and on the shelves at Halfords, Currys, Argos and so on. The most recent model we recommend is the Piqo 1080P (£79 from www.snipca.com/53284).



Google is using dashcam footage to help update elements like speed limits and road signs

Yes, I've heard of them. But what about Geopost?

It's a French company that owns a range of international parcel-delivery firms. In the UK its most recognisable brand is DPD. Presumably, this means that DPD vehicles fitted with dashcams will share their footage with Google.

But what about Nextbase dashcams?

Thankfully, Nextbase isn't just indiscriminately taking footage from its users and sharing it with anyone who asks nicely. In fact, the manufacturer is only granting Google access to clips captured by users who have already joined Nextbase's Road Safety Club.

What's that?

It's an initiative for volunteers who want to help improve safety on UK roads by sharing information about pot holes, road-layout changes and so on, in return for exclusive benefits, such as discounts and free extended warranties (see www.snipca.com/53275). Crucially, you need to opt into Google's dashcam-sharing scheme via the MyNextbase Connect app before any footage is shared with either Nextbase or Google.

What about footage of me recorded by other drivers?

Good point. Google claims it uses "cutting-edge technology" to help blur personal info, such as identifiable faces, car-number plates and so on.

How well does that work?

We don't know yet, but we'll aim to find out. Google also claims it doesn't publish any of the dashcam footage it requests, and that all videos are erased after they have been used. That sounds reassuring enough, but we're still a little uneasy about it. It has the potential for a privacy scandal that would stretch well beyond the pages of *Computeractive*.

Why does Google want this footage, anyway?

To keep Google Maps "fresh and up to date". It might, for example, request dashcam video of a stretch of road where it thinks the speed limit or road signage has recently changed. It can then check this in the dashcam footage and update Google Maps accordingly (as pictured left).

So, overall, it's a good thing?

Ultimately, if you use Google Maps as your in-car navigation system and you want to avoid being caught out by speed cameras in an area where the speed limit has recently changed, then yes. Even better is the fact that, on this occasion, it doesn't appear to come at the cost of your personal privacy. Unless you happen to be a DPD driver, of course.

Why You MUST Bin YOUR OLD ROUTER

An outdated Wi-Fi router puts every device you connect to your home network at risk. Robert Irvine explains the benefits of switching to a faster, safer and more versatile model

Your router is the gateway between the internet and all the devices connected to your home network – whether wirelessly or through Ethernet cables. This means it's essential that your router is as fast, reliable and secure as possible, enabling you to quickly get online no matter where you are in your home.

Yet many of us pay little attention to this essential piece of hardware, and stick with old routers that are long past their peak performance. A survey by Broadband Genie last year found that 89 per cent of UK web users have never updated their router's firmware (www.snipca.com/53336).

Upgrading your router will not only improve the speed and security of your home network, but allow you to benefit from all the recent advances in Wi-Fi technology – and there have been many. The router supplied by your ISP, or that you bought 10 years ago, may still do its job, but switching to a new model will move your network into the fast lane.

In this feature, we tell you why you should ditch your old router, and what you should buy to future-proof your wireless network. We explain the advantages and disadvantages of Wi-Fi 6 and 7 (and 6E), as well as the differences between them, and demystify technical terms such as beamforming.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

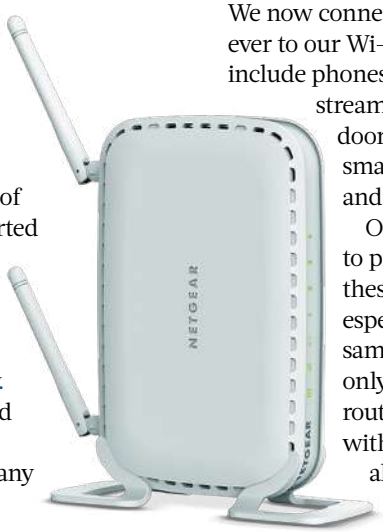
- Protect your network against hackers and malware
- Boost your Wi-Fi signal to eliminate all dead spots
- Connect all your devices to your Wi-Fi network
- Direct your signal precisely to the appropriate hardware
- Prevent network congestion and interference
- Check which versions of Wi-Fi your PC supports

5 REASONS YOU MUST BIN YOUR ROUTER

1 It's vulnerable to hackers

Over the past year, routers have frequently been targeted by hackers or found to contain security flaws that leave them vulnerable to attacks. In November, DrayTek fixed critical flaws in more than 700,000 of its routers (www.snipca.com/53268), and earlier in the year Asus patched vulnerabilities in 21 models (www.snipca.com/53267).

Serious flaws were also discovered in routers from D-Link (www.snipca.com/53271) and Netgear (www.snipca.com/53270) – though these were discontinued models such as the WNR614 (pictured right). Worst of all, in April it was reported that unpatched TP-Link routers were being bombarded with botnet and malware attacks (www.snipca.com/53269), and US authorities are now investigating the company (see page 8).



The Netgear WNR614 was found to have six serious security flaws

Although manufacturers are usually quick to release security updates that fix these flaws, your router is unlikely to receive them if it's reached its end-of-service support. Old and discontinued models are easy targets for hackers, who exploit their vulnerabilities to infiltrate your home network, spread malware and steal sensitive data.

What's more, older routers don't support Wi-Fi Protected Access Version 3 (WPA3). Developed by the Wi-Fi Alliance in 2018, this encrypted security protocol helps protect the data sent to and from devices over your network.

2 Its signal is slow and unreliable

Most old routers are either Wi-Fi 4 (802.11n) models, which use the 2.4GHz and/or 5GHz bands, or Wi-Fi 5 (802.11ac), which works over 5GHz. The 2.4GHz band has wider coverage, while 5GHz is faster and provides more channels.

Regardless of your router's band, the strength, range and reliability of its signal can deteriorate over time due to problems with the device itself. Its firmware may be outdated and no longer receiving updates from the manufacturer; its built-in storage may be almost full; and external factors such as dust, heat and knocks may have damaged its components – including the all-important antennas.

All these factors can make your router much slower and less efficient than when you bought or received it, giving you a good incentive to upgrade.

3 It can't support all your devices

We now connect more devices than ever to our Wi-Fi networks. These include phones, tablets, laptops, TVs, streaming sticks, smart doorbells, security cameras, smart speakers, and heating and lighting systems.

Older routers will struggle to provide a strong signal to all these gadgets simultaneously, especially if they're using the same band and channels. Not only are Wi-Fi 6 (802.11ax) routers (and newer) compatible with more recent devices, they also use a technology called orthogonal frequency division multiple access (OFDMA – see screenshot below) to sub-divide their channels. This lets them direct fast signals to many devices all at once.

As we'll explain later, Wi-Fi 6E and 7 (802.11be) routers are particularly versatile because they offer a 6GHz band on top of the 2.4GHz and 5GHz bands. These tri-band models let you connect hundreds of devices and enjoy high speeds with no congestion.

OFDMA divides Wi-Fi channels to deliver fast speeds to multiple devices

4 Its Wi-Fi coverage is limited

A new router is almost certain to offer a wider Wi-Fi range than your current one. This means its signal will reach more areas of your home, and you won't have to deal with Wi-Fi dead zones (or black spots).

Wi-Fi 6 routers (and newer) also offer improved 'beamforming' – a signal-processing technique that focuses radio and sound waves to improve the quality of the signal. Beamforming allows your router to detect where each device on your network is located. Rather than broadcasting data in all directions, it can direct its signal to the appropriate hardware, ensuring a faster, more reliable connection, fewer dead zones and less interference and congestion.

Control your router from your phone or tablet using the manufacturer's app

5 It lacks customisable features

Old routers, especially those supplied by ISPs, are usually pretty basic in terms of the settings you can tweak to make the most of your Wi-Fi. For example, they may lack options to set up guest networks, change your DNS server (to block ads and trackers), install a VPN, use Quality of Service (QoS) settings to prioritise internet traffic for specific devices and services, and manually upgrade the router's firmware.

Not all new routers offer all these features, and some older models do, but the latest hardware is typically more flexible. It's also more likely to have a mobile app that lets you control and configure your router from your phone or tablet. Netgear's app for its Nighthawk routers (pictured above) is one example.

UPGRADE TO A WI-FI 6 ROUTER

The cheapest way to boost your Wi-Fi signal and security – and to escape the limitations of ISP routers – is to upgrade your home network to Wi-Fi 6. Offering theoretical speeds of up to 9.6Gbps, compared with the 3.5Gbps of Wi-Fi 5 and 600Mbps of Wi-Fi 4, this will significantly improve the performance of your wireless connections to all your devices.

Although Wi-Fi 7 offers higher maximum speeds of up to 46Gbps, even the fastest broadband in the UK (from the London-only internet provider Community Fibre, www.snipca.com/53286) 'only' achieves average download and upload speeds of 3Gbps. This means opting for a Wi-Fi 7 router is currently overkill, not to mention expensive.

More importantly, Wi-Fi 6 routers are compatible with a wide range of phones, tablets, laptops, TVs and other smart devices. The first Wi-Fi 6-enabled products were certified by the Wi-Fi Alliance as far back as 2019, allowing them to benefit from the standard's faster speeds, reduced congestion via OFDMA (see page 51) and improved security through WPA3. So if you've bought a Wi-Fi-enabled gadget in the past few years, there's a very good chance it supports Wi-Fi 6. Amazon's latest Fire TV Stick 4K (www.snipca.com/53300, pictured below) is one example of a Wi-Fi 6 device – the more expensive 4K Max supports Wi-Fi 6E, but the cheaper HD model is limited to Wi-Fi 5.

Wi-Fi 6 also offers lower latency, which improves responsiveness in online games and video calls, and can extend battery life through a technology called Target Wake Time (TWT). This reduces power consumption on devices that connect to your Wi-Fi intermittently, such as smart doorbells and alarms, and frees up bandwidth for hardware that's 'always-on' such as smart TVs.

Older devices with Wi-Fi 5 or Wi-Fi 4 won't offer all the benefits mentioned above, but they will connect to a Wi-Fi 6 router. Wi-Fi 6 is backwards-compatible, which means it supports hardware that uses older wireless standards.

The new Amazon Fire TV Stick 4K supports Wi-Fi 6

The TP-Link Archer AX55 strikes the perfect balance between price and performance

Which Wi-Fi 6 router should you buy?

GOLD AWARD

TP-Link Archer AX55

£70 from www.snipca.com/53287

The TP-Link Archer AX55 (also known as the AX3000) offers the perfect balance between price and performance, making it the ideal upgrade from your old router. It's one of the cheapest Wi-Fi 6 routers you can buy and among the smallest too.

Measuring 165x261x135mm (HxWxD), it will sit neatly on any shelf, desktop or counter and its soft rubber feet won't damage your furniture. You can rotate the AX55's four antennas to spread its signal in multiple directions, and its air vents keep it cool even when lots of devices are demanding data.

As well as dual-band Wi-Fi 6, the router includes four additional Ethernet ports to provide wired connections, and a USB 3.0 port for connecting an external hard drive or NAS. If you need to extend your Wi-Fi further in the future, the AX55 supports TP-Link's OneMesh system for creating a mesh network.

You can use TP-Link's Tether app (www.snipca.com/53288) to set up your new Wi-Fi 6 network, and the browser-based interface to tweak the router's advanced settings. For extra security and privacy, the AX55 lets you install a VPN and comes with TP-Link's HomeShield software to protect you against malware and cyberattacks, as well as a two-year warranty. You can also control it using your voice by linking it with Alexa or Google Assistant.

Inside it has a 1GHz dual-core processor, 512MB of RAM and 128MB of flash storage for the router's firmware and settings. With the ability to handle four independent data streams, it can deliver speeds of more than 574Mbps over its 2.4GHz band and 2.4Gbps over the 5GHz band. It's this combined 3,000Mbps that gives the AX55 its alternative AX3000 name.

The AX55 includes four Ethernet ports and a USB 3 port for external storage

In our tests, the TP-Link Archer AX55 proved to be a reliable and competent router, achieving better speeds and coverage than many pricier Wi-Fi 6 routers. Within a 15-feet range, it delivered an impressive 823.7Mbps, and its maximum range extended to 110 feet – though with a significant drop in performance to around 15Mbps.

The Archer AX55 is a winner if you don't need the higher performance (or price) of Wi-Fi 6E or Wi-Fi 7 devices but want an affordable, well-designed router that will distribute data to all your devices for years to come.

SILVER AWARD

Asus RT-AX86U

£225 from www.snipca.com/53292

The Asus RT-AX86U (aka AX5700) is a Wi-Fi 6 powerhouse that delivers amazing speeds and impressive customisation options, and is particularly suited to online gaming. Although it's considerably more expensive than our

The Asus RT-AX86U delivers impressive Wi-Fi speeds around your entire home

Gold Award winner, it's the best standalone Wi-Fi 6 router for your whole household.

The main draw of the Asus RT-AX86U is its performance. Its signal passes effortlessly through walls and between floors to provide a fast, reliable connection to all your devices, no matter where they are in your home. In our tests, it achieved a superb peak speed of 929.7Mbps within a 15-feet range, and maintained an impressive 250Mbps connection at 75 feet.

Design-wise, the router measures 325x242x100mm (HxWxD) and is intended to stand vertically, with vents at the front and along the top to keep it cool. You can rotate and aim its three external antennas to achieve the strongest signal possible, and these are augmented by an internal antenna.

Also inside the RT-AX86U are 1GB of RAM and 256MB of flash storage. It's powered by a 1.8GHz quad-core processor and offers four Ethernet ports and two USB 3.0 ports.

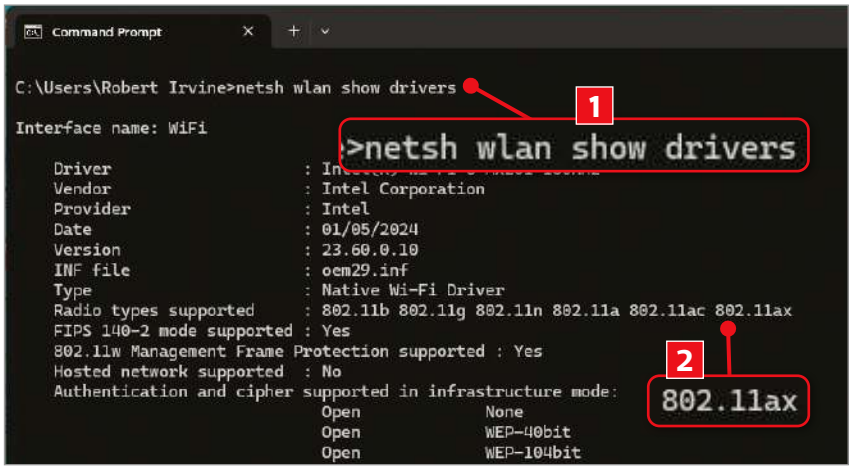
The router is easy to set up using the Asus Router app (ww.snipca.com/53293) or web interface and justifies its comparatively high price with the inclusion of Trend Micro's AiProtection Pro software. This protects your networks against malware, hackers and botnets, and you get a lifetime of free security updates to combat the latest and future threats. The RT-AX86U itself is covered by a two-year warranty.

Check which Wi-Fi your PC supports

If you're not sure whether your computer supports Wi-Fi 6 or 7, there's a quick way to find out. Type cmd into the Windows search box and click Open below Command Prompt.

Now type netsh wlan show drivers (1 in our screenshot) and press Enter to see a list of drivers installed for your wireless adapter. Look to the right of 'Radio types supported' to see all the Wi-Fi versions you can use. If you see 802.11ax 2, your PC supports Wi-Fi 6 and 6E, while 802.11be means it will also work with Wi-Fi 7. Don't worry if you only have 802.11ac (Wi-Fi 5) and 802.11n (Wi-Fi 4) because Wi-Fi 6 is backwards-compatible.

To find out which Wi-Fi standards your other devices use, you'll need to check their specifications on the manufacturers' websites.



BRONZE AWARD

Linksys Hydra Pro 6

£169 from www.snipca.com/53290

Aimed at those who want a modest and unobtrusive Wi-Fi 6 router, the Linksys Hydra Pro 6 (aka MR5500) is a small networking wonder. At 240x230x90mm (HxWxD), it's about the same size as a paperback book, though its two external antennas (it also has an internal one) add another 104mm to its height when pointing straight up.

It's a dual-band router that mixes elements of more expensive and budget models. Its 2.4GHz band can deliver speeds of up to 574Mbps, while its 5GHz band provides up to 4.8Gbps. A high-performance 160MHz data channel caters for data hogs, while advanced beamforming lets it tailor its signal to multiple receiving devices.

The Hydra Pro 6 has a 1GHz dual-core processor, 512MB of RAM and 256MB of storage. Like our Gold Award winner, it has a USB 3.0 port and four Ethernet ports, but it lacks extra security software for protecting your network.

You can use the Hydra Pro 6 as the host router in a mesh network by connecting Linksys Velop Wi-Fi extenders using the company's mobile app. This app also makes the router easy to set up and configure, and includes parental controls and the ability to set up a guest network.

In our tests, the Hydra Pro 6 achieved an excellent speed of 841Mbps within a 15-feet range, falling to 123.1Mbps at 75 feet and with few noticeable dead spots. It's ideal for mid-sized homes, and is regularly discounted on Amazon to as little as £80.

The Linksys Hydra Pro 6 is a compact but high-performing Wi-Fi 6 router

SHOULD YOU BUY A WI-FI 6E ROUTER?

Most new routers from the past few years are Wi-Fi 6E models, which – as we explained on page 51 – means they're able to support the 2.4GHz, 5GHz and 6GHz bands. The latter is comparatively uncongested and has almost twice as many high-bandwidth channels as 5GHz, so you're unlikely to experience interference from nearby Wi-Fi networks.

If it's hard to get a reliable connection to your router on the 5GHz band, the 'fast lane' created by Wi-Fi 6E's 6GHz band will speed up your browsing, streaming, gaming, downloading and other online activities considerably. Although Wi-Fi 6 and 6E have the same features and theoretical speeds, that extra band enables superior performance.

However, there are several caveats about upgrading to a tri-band Wi-Fi 6E router. For starters, they're more expensive than Wi-Fi 6 models, both because they're newer and offer the additional 6GHz capability. Our current 'Buy It!' recommendation, the Asus RT-AXE7800 (www.snipca.com/52957, pictured right, see page 33), is one of the cheaper examples, priced at £230.

Wi-Fi 6E routers like this Asus model have notable pros and cons

That additional band is also one of Wi-Fi 6E's main shortcomings. Higher frequencies mean shorter range, and the 6GHz frequency is so high that its coverage is limited to connections in the same room or the next one. Once you're outside the 6GHz range, the router automatically switches to 5GHz. This isn't a problem with Wi-Fi 6E mesh systems, such as the Google Nest Wi-Fi Pro (www.snipca.com/53302), which extend your signal's reach by letting you connect extra units, but it limits the potential of Wi-Fi 6E standalone routers.

More importantly, Wi-Fi 6E isn't backwards-compatible, which means only Wi-Fi 6E devices can use its 6GHz band. These are typically higher-end phones and tablets – including the latest iPhones and iPads – and gaming laptops.

For all those reasons, you may be better off skipping Wi-Fi 6E and either settling for a cheaper Wi-Fi 6 router, or – if you have the money and performance demands – upgrading to Wi-Fi 7.

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UPGRADE TO A WI-FI 7 ROUTER

Wi-Fi 7 offers significant advantages over Wi-Fi 6 and 6E, and is undoubtedly the future of wireless technology. It provides theoretical speeds of up to 46Gbps – nearly five times those of its predecessors – so it can easily handle 8K video streaming, immersive AR and VR, and advanced smart-home systems. With a Wi-Fi 7 router, you'll be ready to enjoy the benefits of multi-gigabit broadband when it becomes widely available.

Another big advantage is support for Multi-Link Operation (MLO). In the past, your connected devices could only use one Wi-Fi band at a time. For instance, if your laptop connected to the 5GHz band, it couldn't also connect to the 2.4GHz band. With Wi-Fi 7, devices can send and receive data across different bands as well as different channels simultaneously. Not only does this increase throughput or speed, it also reduces latency and gives you a much more reliable connection.

Like Wi-Fi 6E, Wi-Fi 7 supports the super-fast 6GHz band, but doubles the maximum bandwidth for channels from 160MHz to 320MHz. This lets you potentially connect more than 200 devices without them clashing.

Wi-Fi 7 routers are backwards-compatible, which means they'll work with devices that use Wi-Fi 5, 6 and 6E, although only those that support Wi-Fi 7 will get all their benefits. Current examples include the iPhone 16 and Google Pixel 9 series, Samsung Galaxy S24 Ultra and HP's Spectre X360 convertible laptops (pictured above right), with more on their way soon.

Although Wi-Fi 7 routers are still quite expensive, they're getting cheaper as new models become available, so you can choose one that best suits your future needs. They're a better long-term investment than a Wi-Fi 6E model – for the reasons we explained opposite.

HP's Spectre X360 convertible laptops are among the few that support Wi-Fi 7

Which Wi-Fi 7 router should you buy?

GOLD AWARD

Netgear Nighthawk RS300

£285 from www.snipca.com/51974

Netgear has an eclectic selection of Wi-Fi 7 routers, ranging from the dual-band Nighthawk RS200 (priced £200) to the quad-band Orbi 970 mesh router (from £800). The tri-band Nighthawk RS300 (pictured below) is the best option, because it gives you all the benefits of Wi-Fi 7 without breaking the bank.

Despite its relatively low price, the RS300 offers surprisingly good specifications – its 6GHz band achieves maximum speeds of 5.9Gbps, which can combine with the other bands to deliver up to 9.3Gbps. That's actually modest for Wi-Fi 7 but more than adequate for home users and even small businesses.

The router can cover areas of up to 185 square metres and support up to 100 devices, which again is likely to surpass the needs of most households. It creates a single network that merges the three frequency bands and automatically connects your devices to the fastest band available in that room or location.

For wired connections, the RS300 provides five Ethernet ports – three are 2.5Gbps (with one reserved for your fibre broadband cable) and two 1Gbps – as well as a USB 3.0 port for external storage. It's not as stylish as many Wi-Fi 7 routers, but its compact size (249x150x102mm, HxWxD) means you can place it anywhere.

Setup is straightforward through the Nighthawk mobile app – just scan a QR code to identify and connect to the router. The rest of the process is mostly automatic, while you can configure advanced management features, such as port forwarding, through the web interface.

In our tests, the RS300 achieved excellent speeds of over 1Gbps within a 15-feet range, and we were able to download 100MB files at 140MB/s – literally in the blink of an eye. As with any standalone router, no matter which version of Wi-Fi it supports, performance drops as you move further from it, but the RS300 held up well. Even in the most distant room, it managed 718Mbps over its 6GHz band.

If you're thinking of ditching your old Wi-Fi 5 or 6 router, the Nighthawk RS300 will fulfil your networking needs for years to come. It's the best-value 'true' Wi-Fi 7 router (see box on page 56) you can buy at the moment.

The Netgear Nighthawk RS300 is the best-value Wi-Fi 7 router you can buy

On the back of the Nighthawk are five Ethernet ports and a USB 3.0 port

SILVER AWARD

TP-Link Deco BE65 Pro

£580 from www.snipca.com/53313

A mesh system is the perfect solution for spreading high-speed internet throughout a large or thick-walled home, eliminating dead spots and catering for every wireless device. Although the TP-Link Deco BE65 Pro (pictured right) is twice the price of our Gold Award winner, it's comparatively cheap for a Wi-Fi 7 mesh router, with some rival three-unit models exceeding £1,000.

Its three nodes are identical – plastic with a flat white finish and measuring 107mm in diameter and 180mm tall. The top of each node has a circular ring with ventilation to cool the internal components, while at the bottom there's a single LED. On the back of each unit you'll find a WPS button, a 2.5Gbps Ethernet port, two 5Gbps ports and a USB 3.0 port.

You configure and control the Deco BE65 Pro through TP-Link's Deco app – there is a web interface too, but it's rather basic. This lets you set different network names and passwords for its combined 2.4GHz and 5GHz band and the separate 6GHz band. Usefully, you can specify which devices connect to which band – so Wi-Fi 6E and 7 gadgets always use 6GHz, for example – and also which node they use. The app provides access to lots of other features too, including security scans, parental controls, guest networks and much more.

In our tests, the Deco BE65 Pro performed exceptionally well, achieving speeds of 1.85Gbps within close range, and 180Mbps at 75 feet away. Because you can place its nodes wherever you want, its signal will cover every corner of your house and garden.

The TP-Link Deco BE65 Pro mesh router spreads Wi-Fi throughout your home

BRONZE AWARD

Asus ROG Rapture GT-BE98

£666 from www.snipca.com/53315

Resembling an upside-down robot spider, the Asus ROG Rapture GT-BE98 (pictured below) is as off-putting in its appearance as it is in its high price, but it's one of the most powerful and versatile routers you can buy. With quad-band Wi-Fi 7 (2.4GHz, two 5GHz and 6GHz bands) and a top speed of 24.4Gbps, it's the fastest Wi-Fi 7 router we've seen so far.

The Asus ROG Rapture GT-BE98 offers quad-band Wi-Fi and incredible speeds

The GT-BE98 is built like a tank, weighing more than many laptops (2kg) and measuring 221x350x350 (HxWxD), before you extend its eight threatening-looking antennas. It's powered by a 2.6GHz quad-core processor, includes 2GB of RAM and 256MB of storage, and has a large top vent and nanocarbon-coated heatsink to keep it cool.

The four Wi-Fi bands are complemented by 10Gbps and 2.5Gbps Ethernet ports that you can use either for high-speed broadband connections or wired connections to a laptop and other devices. You also get two USB ports (3.2 and 2.0) for connecting external drives.

Bonus features, which you can access through the app, include subscription-free network security through Trend Micro's AiProtection Pro, a VPN with a choice of nine protocols and free parental controls. You can even use the GT-BE98 as part of a mesh network by connecting other Asus devices.

In our tests, it effortlessly hit speeds of 2Gbps on its 6GHz band, even when we moved our test laptop 25 feet away. Even on the 5GHz band, it reached nearly 1Gbps. For most home users, a router of this price and power will be overkill, but it certainly unlocks the full potential of Wi-Fi 7.

Should you buy a budget Wi-Fi 7 router?

Some Wi-Fi 7 routers are considerably cheaper than our three award winners – for example, the TP-Link Archer BE3600 currently costs only £100 on Amazon (www.snipca.com/53317, pictured). They may seem like a bargain, but the low price is because they're dual-band rather than tri-band (or quad-band) like 'proper' Wi-Fi 7 routers.

This means they only use the 2.4GHz and 5GHz bands, not the 6GHz one that allows Wi-Fi 7 to deliver blazing speeds, avoid congestion and support hundreds of devices. That's not to say they're rubbish routers – their theoretical performance will still far exceed the upper limit of your broadband connection.

However, in the longer term, as you acquire more Wi-Fi 7 devices that can take advantage of a 6GHz network, the router's shortcomings will become more apparent. You would be better off buying our Gold Award-winning Wi-Fi 6 model – or saving your money for a true, tri-band Wi-Fi 7 router.

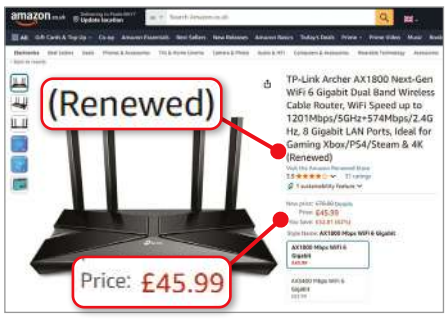
SAVE MONEY ON A NEW ROUTER

Buy a refurbished router

As we explained on page 51, older routers are less likely to receive security and software updates, which can render them unsafe and slow. But many refurbished models are still supported by their manufacturers, are in excellent condition and come with a one-year warranty, helping you save money at minimal risk.

Amazon Renewed (www.snipca.com/53318) sells cut-price routers from brands including TP-Link and Netgear, as well as unlocked devices from ISPs. At the time of writing, the store had several Wi-Fi 6 and 6E models, including the three-year-old TP-Link Archer AX1800 for £46 (www.snipca.com/53318 – pictured below). We even spotted a Wi-Fi 7 model, the TP-Link BE19000 Tri-Band (www.snipca.com/53319), though this still cost a pricey £510.

Other good places to try include Pacetech, which specialises in refurbished TP-Link routers (www.snipca.com/53320), and eBay's Home Network Wireless Routers section (www.snipca.com/53321). With the latter, click the Condition dropdown menu and choose 'Certified – Refurbished'. This will show you items in 'like-new' condition, which have been professionally checked, cleaned and refurbished by the manufacturer or an authorised provider. We saw a TP-Link Archer BE550 tri-band Wi-Fi 7 router for just £180 (www.snipca.com/53322) that costs £300 new.



Save money on a router by buying a refurbished model from Amazon Renewed

Is your old router obsolete?

Your old router will continue to work past its end-of-life and end-of-service dates, but because the manufacturer may not patch security flaws beyond those dates, it could leave your network vulnerable to hackers without you even realising. That's why it's important to check whether your device is still receiving updates from the manufacturer.

If you have an Asus router, check the company's 'End-of-life product list' at www.snipca.com/53329 to see if your device is no longer eligible for firmware updates (it may still receive security patches). For example, the Asus RT-AC52U (pictured), which we reviewed back in 2015, is no longer updated.

TP-Link has a new page for End of Life Products at www.snipca.com/53330, which lists the end-of-service dates for its Home Networking and Smart Home devices. Recent additions include the Archer AX6000, which we reviewed in May 2020.

Netgear lists end-of-service routers at www.snipca.com/53331, and highlights those with security vulnerabilities at www.snipca.com/53332.

Ask your ISP for a free router

If you're still using the same old router – or smart hub – your ISP gave you when you signed up, you may be eligible for a free upgrade. This will help you avoid compatibility issues when switching to a third-party router, though you'll still suffer your ISP's router restrictions.

As a rule, internet providers only offer existing customers new routers when they extend their contracts or change to a more expensive plan. But if your Wi-Fi signal is slow, unreliable and doesn't reach most of your home, there's no harm in asking for an upgrade.

If your BT phone service has been migrated to Digital Voice, you should have received a Smart Hub 2 – if you didn't already have one. However, this only supports Wi-Fi 5, so is now out of date. Much better is the EE Smart Hub Plus (pictured above right), which supports Wi-Fi 6. You may have been offered this router when your BT broadband service was moved to EE, but if not, it's worth requesting one. In September, EE launched a new Wi-Fi 7 router, the Smart Hub Pro (www.snipca.com/53326), which it includes with its fastest (and priciest) broadband bundles and as an add-on for Full Fibre customers.

Unlike the BT Smart Hub 2, the EE Smart Hub Plus supports Wi-Fi 6

Virgin Media will usually upgrade you to its new Hub 5 only if you switch to one of its Gig1 Fibre broadband packages, and Sky's Max Hub is only available with its Wi-Fi Max add-on. But if your ISP-issued router is very old and no longer receives security updates, the company is legally obliged to replace it under the new 'Product Security and Telecommunications Infrastructure Act' and Telecoms Security Act (see www.snipca.com/53325). ca

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Get a GRIP!

Modern devices – especially phones – are so slippery that it's getting harder to hold them firmly. Daniel Booth explains how to add grip so you don't keep dropping them

Recent figures show one in 10 Brits own a smartphone with a cracked screen. They haven't been juggling them while drunk (well, some may have). It's more likely they've slipped through their fingers.

That figure doesn't surprise us because we've noticed that phones – and other handheld devices – have become harder to grip in recent years. It's not that we're growing clumsier. The fault lies with manufacturers who prioritise sleek glass designs over making devices easy to hold.

This change began in 2010 with the iPhone 4, which was Apple's first phone to ditch plastic and use glass on the front *and* back. You could say it was the start of a slippery slope. All manufacturers now favour glass for its 'premium' feel, which naturally means they can charge more for their products.

Glass is also more resistant to scratches than plastic, works better with wireless charging and is easier to recycle. But this comes at the expense of grip. Glass is smooth and glossy, offering hardly any friction against your hand and surfaces. There are ways to improve a phone's 'grippability' though, as we'll explain.

Buy a silicone phone case

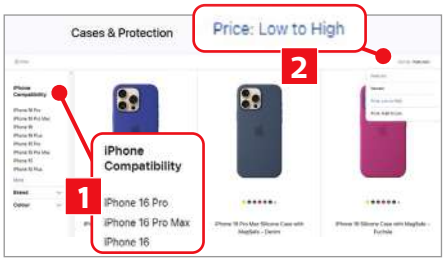
Manufacturers might think adding a phone case ruins their beautiful design, but it'll help make your phone less slippery. These cases have textured or rubberised surfaces that add friction, making devices easier to grasp – especially when grabbing them quickly off a table or from your pocket.

You need to decide whether to buy a slim case that adds grip but doesn't provide much protection from falls, or something bigger and heavier that does. Whichever you choose, look for one made from pure silicone, which has a 'sticky' texture that's easier to grasp. They're also (mostly) cheap and come in many colours.

You could type 'silicone phone case' into Amazon and browse the results, but you'll have 10,000 to wade through, and many cases are from obscure brands. That said, some of these are cheap enough (under £10) to take a gamble on.

A more forensic method is to research which case you need on a manufacturer's site or their specific Amazon store. For example, visit www.snipca.com/53304 to see silicone cases on the Amazon store of South Korean firm Spigen.

Apple also sells silicone cases for iPhones, and has done so since version seven, released in 2016. Visit www.snipca.com/53342 then pick your phone on the left (1 in our screenshot above right). Click the top-right filter to see the cases listed in price order from lowest to highest 2, but prepare yourself: the cheapest is still a hefty £35.



Select your phone on Apple's site, then order the results from lowest to highest price

The cases in both ranges are slim. If you need something bulkier and more rugged, look at the Defender cases from US firm OtterBox. These are made from a combination of polycarbonate and synthetic rubber, which is close to the grippiness of silicone – visit its Amazon store at www.snipca.com/53324. You'll pay more for this protection though – prices are typically around £40.

Spigen's TPU Liquid Air cases offer an ideal balance of grip and protection

Buy a TPU phone case

While silicone cases are easy to grip and cheap (iPhone cases aside), they also attract dirt and don't offer the best protection from drops. You may prefer a case made from thermoplastic polyurethane (TPU), which combines the flexibility of rubberised cases with the toughness of

textured plastic, offering a better balance between grip and protection.

Again, consider a Spigen case. Visit www.snipca.com/53323 to see its Liquid Air cases, which are made almost entirely from TPU and all cost under £20 – including its model for the iPhone SE (www.snipca.com/53341, pictured below left).

If you don't find anything you like from Spigen, look for a case in the Commuter range from US firm OtterBox: www.snipca.com/53303. These have an inner TPU layer for absorbing impact and a hard polycarbonate outer shell.

Buy a collapsible phone grip

If you're not keen on cases, try a grip-enhancing accessory instead. The most popular options are PopSockets, which are rubberised circular grips that attach to the back of phones. You expand them when needed, and they fit snugly into most hands or between fingers (pictured below), reducing the strain of holding a large or heavy phone. When you don't need the grip, just push it down flat, and your phone will slip easily into your pocket.

PopSockets are particularly popular with young people. Visit www.popsockets.co.uk and you'll see why: there are lots of colourful, quirky designs, many of them branded with characters from Disney, Harry Potter, Marvel comics and Star Wars. Thankfully, there are also plenty of plain designs – they're at the top of this page: www.snipca.com/53327. We think black or clear grips will suit most readers.

Your choice of grip largely depends on the phone you've got. If you own an iPhone 12 (released 2020) or later, look for a grip that works with Apple's MagSafe technology. These connect to the magnet on the back of the phone. There's a separate section for MagSafe grips on the site (www.snipca.com/53328) – prices start at £29.99.

If you have an older iPhone or an Android device, you'll need a grip that uses adhesive to stick to the back. Return to www.snipca.com/53327 then click 'Product type' at the top and tick Phone Grip. This will remove all MagSafe grips from the results. There's also a colour menu to refine your results. These grips are much cheaper than MagSafe – you can buy a plain black model for £10.99.

Buy a phone strap

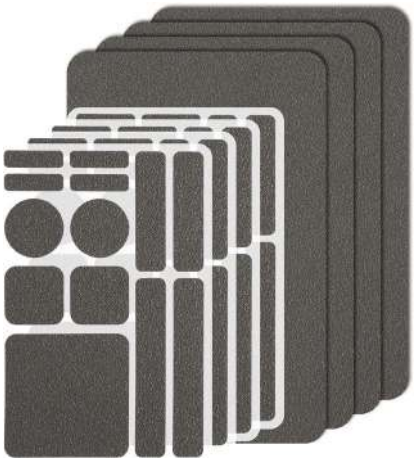
If you can buy one without sniggering, try a LoveHandle phone strap (www.lovehandle.com), which sticks to the back of your phone or case with adhesive. Confusingly, LoveHandle calls them 'grips', but they're straps to you and me. More important is that they're lighter and less bulky than PopSockets. They work with most phones and cases and don't interfere with wireless charging.

As with PopSockets, there are plenty of sparkly and colourful straps you might find too garish (we certainly do), but we found a more tasteful plain black strap in the Pro range. This costs £26 by itself (www.snipca.com/53333, pictured below left) or £32 with a mount that attaches the phone to a flat surface such as a wall or car dashboard (www.snipca.com/53334). There's also a Pro strap that works with MagSafe-compatible iPhones.

If you're keen on a mount but want something cheaper, consider Sinjimoru's S-Grip (£12.99 from www.snipca.com/53335), which can be adjusted to prop up your phone.

PopSockets expand to fit snugly between your fingers

LoveHandle's strap attaches to the back of your phone



Aster's grippy tape comes in circles, squares and rectangles

Buy grip tape

The cheapest option of all is to buy a roll of textured tape that you can cut to size and stick to the back of your phone. There's loads of choice on Amazon, but for pre-cut tape, consider this £7.99 pack from Aster (www.snipca.com/53340, pictured above), which comes in squares, rectangles and circles. You can also buy circular tape to stick to the back of collapsible grips like PopSockets. This pack gives you nine for £5.99: www.snipca.com/53338.

These tapes could also work for other slippery devices, such as mice, ebook readers and earbud cases. But a better choice is this £8.95 pack from Pulsar (www.snipca.com/53339). Its anti-sweat material is aimed at serious gamers who need fast mouse reactions, but you don't have to be zapping zombies to benefit from their grippiness. ca

Choose a phone made of plastic

You could of course skip cases, grips and tape entirely and just buy a plastic phone, avoiding the slipperiness of glass. They're considered less premium by manufacturers, which means they're normally cheaper than glass equivalents.

Nokia's XR20 costs £177 renewed on Amazon (www.snipca.com/53346), with a 6.67in screen and 4GB RAM. Samsung's Galaxy A32 is also available renewed, for £117 (www.snipca.com/53349). It uses 'glastic', which is Samsung's informal term for a plastic back with a matte finish. Most phones in Motorola's Moto G range are plastic, including the G8 Power (£125 from www.snipca.com/53350).

Finally, for a more environmentally friendly phone, buy the Fairphone 5, which is made from recyclable plastic. It costs a lot more than the other two options though – £479 from www.snipca.com/53345.

Use a VPN on your SMART TV

Watch shows and films from the US – or anywhere else – by installing a VPN on your smart TV. **Robert Irvine** explains the benefits and recommends the best services

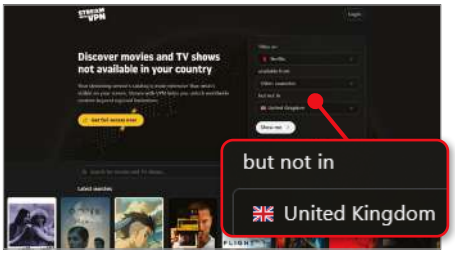
WHY YOU NEED A VPN ON YOUR TV

Watch TV shows from other countries

The main reason to install a VPN on your television is to watch TV shows, films and sporting events that aren't available to stream in the UK. By selecting VPN servers in other countries, you can access the regional versions of streaming services using valid IP addresses. These often have different and larger libraries than we have over here, giving you a greater choice of viewing.

You'll also be able to install smart TV apps that are unavailable in UK app stores due to geographical licensing restrictions. Visit the excellent website Stream With VPN (www.streamwithvpn.com, see screenshot below) to discover which shows and films you can only watch on overseas streaming services.

Some services detect and block VPNs to prevent you from watching geo-restricted content, or may deduce your real location when you sign up with your personal and payment-card details. However, the best VPNs – which we'll reveal later – are able to fool Netflix, Disney+, Hulu, (HBO) Max and more into thinking you're accessing them from the US and other countries.



Stream With VPN reveals which shows and films are only available in other countries

A VPN will also customise the home screen on your TV or streaming device to show content relevant to the country you're pretending to be in. For example, by choosing a US server you'll be able to unlock more than 130 'live' channels on a Google TV- powered set, including blockbuster films and classic TV series. See our 'Easy when you know how' column in Issue 689 (page 74) for our experience with using a VPN to watch these channels.

Stop your smart TV spying on you

Many manufacturers of smart TVs and streaming devices use automatic content recognition (ACR) to analyse your viewing habits. This privacy-invading technology is often turned on by default, or you may have inadvertently agreed to allow it when you set up your TV.

ACR takes a small sample of the video and audio playing on your screen and matches it against a massive database to identify what you're watching. This includes TV shows and films on streaming services, digital channels and even DVDs and Blu-rays. The data is then shared with device manufacturers and sold to advertisers so they can show you ads based on your perceived interests and location.

Although you can usually switch off ACR in your smart TV's settings, it's better to use a VPN. This will encrypt your internet connection to stop your TV spying on your viewing activities and collecting data about you to target you with ads and 'recommendations'.

Some VPNs block tracking cookies and adverts at a network level to make watching TV a more private and less annoying experience. This is particularly useful if you visit websites in your smart TV's browser, because it stops them gathering information about you to build a profile of your interests.

Most TV apps have hidden trackers, which an effective VPN will render useless. If you suspect your anonymity has been compromised, because you're seeing personalised ads, you can simply switch to another server to evade tracking and reset your profile. If certain apps don't load properly when you access them through a VPN, you can whitelist them to disable the VPN's encryption.

WHICH VPN SHOULD YOU INSTALL ON YOUR TV?

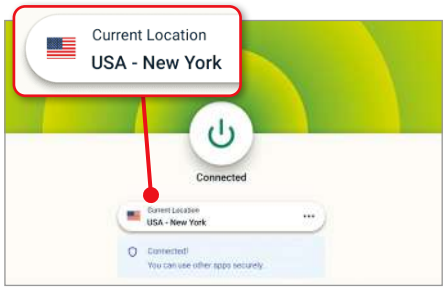
If you have a Google/Android TV or Fire TV, you can install a VPN from its built-in app store. However, for Samsung Tizen and LG WebOS TVs, you'll need a service that supports Smart DNS. While this doesn't give you the encryption and privacy of an actual VPN, it lets you switch your location to another country to access geo-restricted content.

Whereas a VPN directs all your internet traffic through a different server, Smart DNS only diverts your DNS (Domain Name Server) information. Although this won't encrypt your internet traffic, it's enough to fool streaming services. Smart DNS also slows your connection far less

than a VPN.

For Roku and other TV systems that don't support VPNs or Smart DNS, you can install a VPN on your router. Some VPNs offer dedicated router apps to make this easier to set up.

Here are the best VPNs you can currently install on your smart TV.



ExpressVPN lets you easily connect to 24 servers in the United States

NordVPN's kill switch disconnects you when you lose the VPN's protection

GOLD AWARD

ExpressVPN

www.snipca.com/53378

ExpressVPN is our favourite VPN for smart TVs because it's packed with useful features and is compatible with a wide range of models. So, no matter what kind of screen you're watching, the service has you covered. It's incredibly easy to set up and use, which makes it ideal for VPN novices.

ExpressVPN boasts over 3,000 servers in 105 countries, including 24 in the US (see screenshot above right), so you won't have to worry about geo-blocks getting in the way of your viewing. It lets you access all the top streaming services, including Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, Hulu, Max and Peacock, without your encrypted connection being flagged as suspicious.

Privacy-wise, ExpressVPN is one of the most secure VPNs, thanks to AES-256bit encryption and a choice of protocols. It also includes an ad blocker, password manager, powerful kill switch that disconnects you from the internet when you lose connection, built-in speed test and advanced leak protection to stop your activities being tracked.

You can install the ExpressVPN app from your TV's app store, or – if your set doesn't support VPNs – use its MediaStreamer Smart DNS service. Alternatively, ExpressVPN can be installed on your router.

The only catch is that ExpressVPN is more expensive than rival services, priced at £10.32 a month. However, if you sign up for a two-year subscription, this is reduced to £4.04 a month – plus you currently get four months for free (see www.snipca.com/53377).

SILVER AWARD

NordVPN

www.snipca.com/53381

NordVPN is slightly cheaper than ExpressVPN, but not quite as easy to use, priced from £9.89 a month or £2.69 a month if you pay for two years. Its cheapest plan, Basic, offers enough features for most VPN users and lets you use it on up to 10 devices – including smart TVs. Paying extra for the Plus or Ultimate plans gives you an ad and tracker blocker, anti-malware protection, and other privacy and security features that ExpressVPN includes with *all* its plans (which is why it deserves our Gold Award).

NordVPN is able to unblock all the main streaming services, including Netflix in the US, Canada, Australia and Japan, through its network of more than 5,500 servers in 59 countries. Like ExpressVPN's MediaStreamer, NordVPN's SmartDNS service offers some of the benefits of a VPN on unsupported TVs.

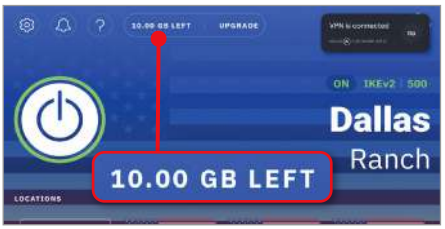
You also get AES-256bit encryption, reliable DNS leak protection and a kill switch (see screenshot above). NordVPN's Meshnet feature (www.snipca.com/53380) lets you securely share data between devices, and is used by some people to bypass Netflix's password-sharing restrictions.

BRONZE AWARD

Windscribe

www.snipca.com/53384

The Windscribe app for smart TVs is basic compared with ExpressVPN and NordVPN, and it can't compete with their choice of servers and locations. However, it has the major advantage of a completely free plan, which gives you a generous 10GB of data a month (see screenshot below) once you confirm your email address – enough to stream a few HD films or a TV series on a service outside the UK.



Windscribe's free plan gives you 10GB of data and several US servers

If that isn't enough, Windscribe's unlimited paid-for Pro plan is a reasonable $9 (£7.23) a month, or $5.75 (£4.62) a month if you commit for a year, and unlocks its full selection of servers in 69 countries. But unlike other VPNs, you get several US servers for free. We also like Windscribe's R.O.B.E.R.T. feature, which blocks ads and trackers.

You can install Windscribe's app directly on Google/Android and Amazon Fire TVs from the relevant app store. If your TV isn't supported, you can either use the Smart DNS feature, set up a VPN profile on your router (Pro version only) or create a secure hotspot on your PC – see www.snipca.com/53383 for more information. ca

What can you watch with a VPN?

Oppenheimer (2023)

The multi-award-winning biopic about the inventor of the atomic bomb (pictured) is available on Netflix in Australia and New Zealand.

Lost (2004)

US streaming service Hulu has all six seasons of this cult series, about the survivors of a plane crash on a mysterious island.

Secrets and Lies (1996)

Director Mike Leigh's films are curiously absent from UK streaming services, but this and many others can be found on US Netflix and Max.

Psycho (1960)

Alfred Hitchcock's groundbreaking horror film isn't available on any UK service, but can be streamed on Paramount+ in the US.

The Twilight Zone (1959)

Amazon's Freevee service hosts the first five seasons of the classic science-fiction series, but only in the US.

Problems Solved

Our experts solve all your tech problems

PROBLEM OF THE FORTNIGHT

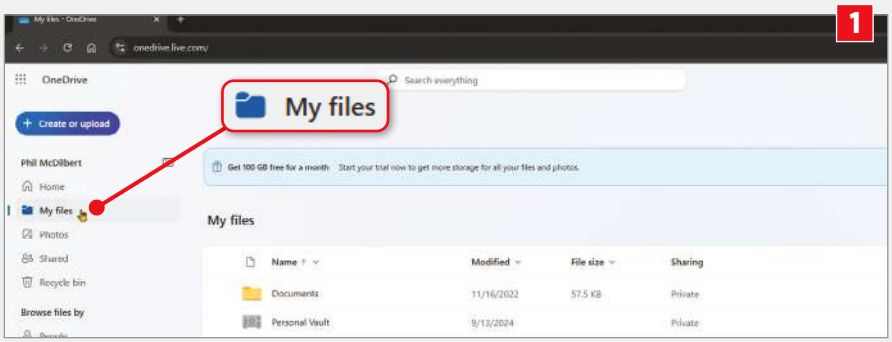
Is OneDrive reliable in the long term?

Q Is Microsoft's OneDrive reliable for long-term storage? Recently, I powered up an old Windows 10 PC for the first time in three years to extract any useful files before scrapping it, but I found that I could no longer access its OneDrive folder.

I could see all my files in File Explorer, but none of them opened, and according to an error message that appeared, the OneDrive 'cloud file provider' wasn't running. I tried a complicated multi-step recovery process, but predictably it failed. Now I realise that years ago all these files may have gone straight to OneDrive rather than into local drive folders, so there were no local copies.

It's not a major problem because I have backups of them elsewhere, but it could have been a disaster. I've had several Windows PCs since that one and each has had a different folder structure, leading to a very confusing OneDrive configuration. Is the lesson here to store valuable files anywhere other than in online storage?

John Hudson



If you visit the OneDrive website and log in, you should find all your files in the 'My files' folder

A Microsoft's constant tinkering with folder structures and naming in various versions of Windows certainly hasn't helped users understand the system. However, it would be wrong to think OneDrive is inherently unreliable – or at least any more so than other major online-storage tools.

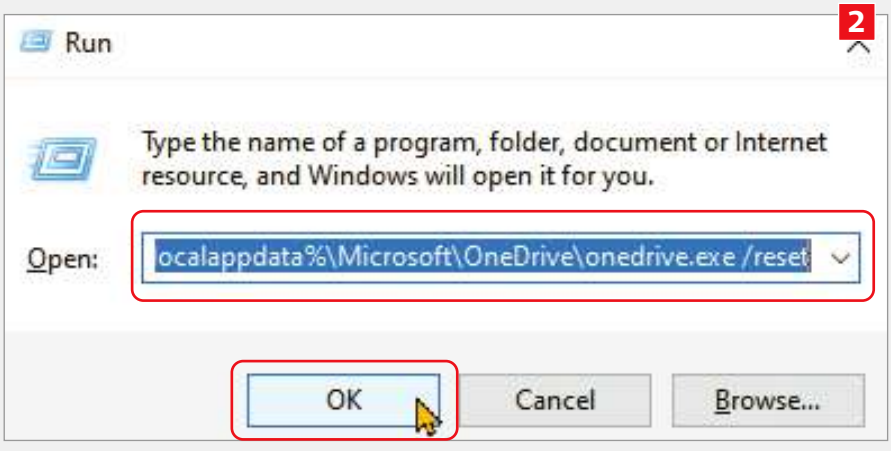
We don't have any details of your Windows 10 or OneDrive setup, or of the recovery procedure that failed, but the basic idea behind a cloud service such as OneDrive is that your original files are always available online, which means on a Microsoft server somewhere. Then, depending on how OneDrive is set up on your PC, it will sync all or some of those files to your local storage.

We suspect that after three years offline, the OneDrive tool on your PC needed to update itself before it could sync. For some reason this process went wrong, but this won't have affected your original files in the cloud or made them unavailable to your other devices. If you log in at www.onedrive.com using your Microsoft credentials, you should find all your original files (just click 'My files' on the left – see screenshot 1).

We suggest you try resetting OneDrive before relaunching it. To do this, first press Windows key+R to open the Run box, then type %localappdata%\Microsoft\OneDrive\onedrive.exe /reset and press Enter or click OK 2. Alternatively, you can copy and paste the command from our Pastebin page at www.snipca.com/53074. Now restart your computer.

Finally, when deciding where to store your most valuable files, the best advice is to keep them in as many places as possible. It's sensible to keep a local copy of files that are important to you, as well as your own backup, which ideally you would keep in a different location to the main drive. Equally, entrusting those files to a cloud service such as OneDrive is a useful backup – and one you don't have to worry about managing personally.

Of course, there's no guarantee that Microsoft won't shut down OneDrive some day, but that's not likely to happen any time soon. What's more, it wouldn't happen overnight. A company of Microsoft's size would probably warn of its intentions years in advance – so you'd have plenty of time to retrieve your files.



Reset your OneDrive folder by pasting this command into the Run box

Would payments using my Motorola phone be secure?

Q I need a new mobile phone, specifically one I can use to tap and pay. I had decided to buy the new Motorola G75 (pictured), but looking at the phone's specification on Motorola's website, I noticed it said 'NFC Non-eSE'. I had no idea what 'eSE' meant so I looked it up, and apparently it means Embedded Secure Element. So if the G75 lacks this, does that mean my NFC payments won't be encrypted? In other words, are my payment-card details safe on this phone? I've never seen this caveat on any other manufacturers' phones.

Malcolm Samuels

A As a rule, any phone that supports modern contactless payments, such as Google Pay, must do so securely. This is a requirement set by the service provider (Google, in this case). The payment service is less worried about exactly *how* manufacturers implement this security, but they can achieve it via a combination of hardware and software, or only through software.

From the user's perspective, a hardware-based solution is always better, because it tends to be more secure and may even be faster in everyday use. However, a purely software-based security system that meets the payment-service provider's safety framework will also be reliably secure.

It seems the Motorola G75 relies on software-based security rather than hardware. That's what the slightly cryptic 'non-eSE' part of its NFC specification means. Software security is the cheaper option, and it's common in phones in the low-to-mid price range. Not all manufacturers provide so much detail on their specifications pages, which is probably because it doesn't really matter very much.

So in short, yes, you can make electronic payments securely using this phone. What's more, if you're using Google Pay, your card details are not actually stored on the phone itself. Instead, Google Pay uses something called 'host card emulation', while storing your details securely on its servers. Neither your phone nor the recipient of your payment ever sees your real card details because Google Pay generates a 'virtual' card number for each new transaction, adding yet another level of security to this type of payment. You can read more about how this works on Google's website, at www.snipca.com/53077.

Mid-price phones such as the Motorola G75 use software to secure contactless payments

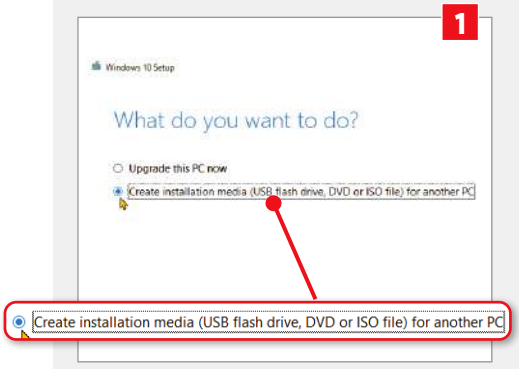
Why won't my Windows 10 PC update?

Q As an avid *Computeractive* reader from your earliest days, I'd appreciate any help you can give me. I'm having trouble updating my Windows 10 PC.

I have Windows 10 Pro version 22H2, but a message in Windows Update tells me it's not up to date and that my device is missing important security and quality fixes. When I view the update history, it says 22H2 was installed in 2022, and the last Quality Update was in August 2023. When I click 'Check for updates', it says: "We couldn't connect to the update service. We'll try again later, or you can check now. If it still doesn't work, make sure you're connected to the Internet."

I tried using the Windows Update Troubleshooter but it couldn't identify the problem. I've also searched online but to no avail. Can you help?

Richard Weldon


1
Windows 10 Setup
What do you want to do?
Upgrade this PC now
Create installation media (USB flash drive, DVD or ISO file) for another PC
Create installation media (USB flash drive, DVD or ISO file) for another PC

Solve your Windows update problems by using Windows 10's media creation tool

2
Windows 10 Setup
Choose which media to use
If you want to install Windows 10 on another partition, you need to create and
USB flash drive
It needs to be at least 8 GB.
ISO file
You'll need to burn the ISO file to a DVD later.
USB flash drive

Choose this option to install the update tool to a spare USB flash drive

A When your PC is having trouble updating automatically, you can use Microsoft's free media-creation tool to update manually. This usually works where other methods fail. Visit www.snipca.com/53075 and, under 'Create Windows 10 installation media', click the Download Now button. Work through the steps, choosing the 'Create installation media...' option (see screenshot 1) to copy Windows 10 to a USB stick 2.

Now restart your PC with this stick plugged in. When the tool asks which type of installation you want, choose 'Upgrade: Install Windows and keep files, settings, and applications', then follow the instructions to complete the upgrade.

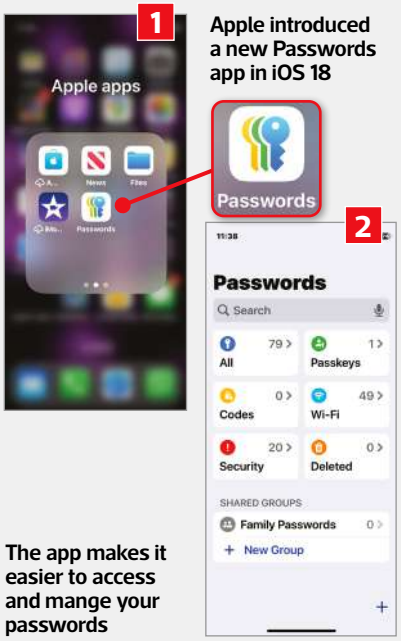
Is Apple's new Passwords app safe to use?

Q I've just updated my iPhone to iOS 18, and it seems I now I have an app called Passwords (pictured below 1). This sounds very useful, but as I'm not very technically minded, I don't know how safe and secure this would be. Can you advise?

Jacqui Lyons

A The iPhone's system software – iOS – has long been able to store passwords for everything from your favourite websites to your Wi-Fi network. You were probably already using some or all of those features without even realising it. The new Passwords app simply brings all that data together in one place 2, and makes it much easier to access and manage. It's long overdue.

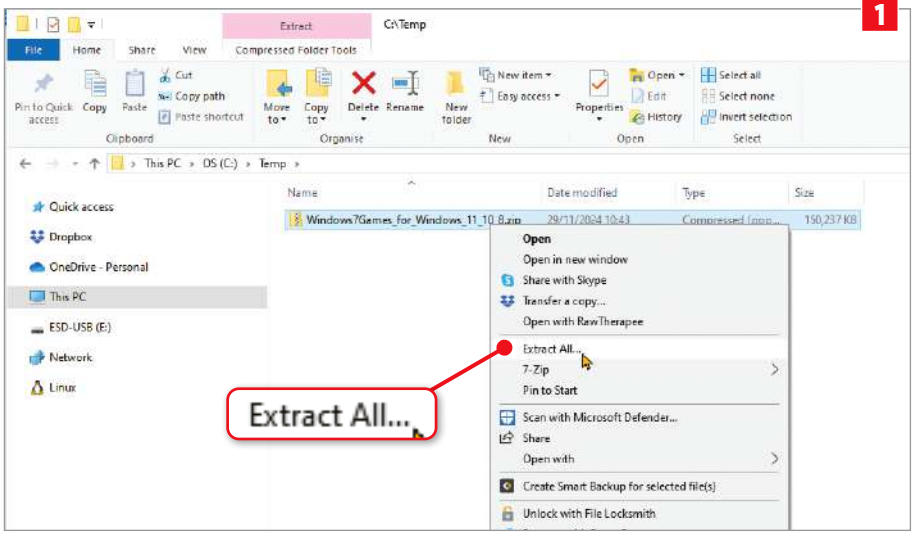
Is it safe? Well, it's at least as safe as any other modern password-management tool. In fact, as Apple has tight control over every aspect of its hardware devices and iOS, its products and services are among the most secure in the industry – so we'd have no qualms about using the new Passwords app.



Apple introduced a new Passwords app in iOS 18

The app makes it easier to access and mange your passwords

Where are my old Microsoft games?



Once you've downloaded your XP games from Winaero's site, select the file and click Extract

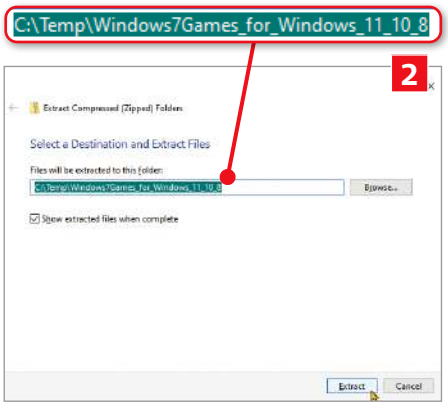
Q After a recent update to my Windows 11 Home PC, all my Windows 7 games, including Solitaire and Chess Titans, have disappeared. I think Microsoft is pushing me to download the current equivalents, but they're not as good as the originals. Is there anywhere I can get the old ones?

John All

A These ancient Microsoft games have never been part of Windows 10 or 11, so we can only assume you've either upgraded from Windows XP or 7 recently, or you were using clever tricks to get the old games working in later versions of Windows.

For those who still have an old Windows XP computer, there are ways to copy old games to later Windows versions and hack bits of code to make them work. It isn't easy, however, and you haven't mentioned that you still have an XP PC lying around. So a much easier option is to download Winaero Tweaker from www.snipca.com/53078. Its developers did all the hard work for you years ago to make all these games available in later versions of Windows.

Click the link 'Download Windows 7 Games for Windows 10, Windows 8 and Windows 8.1.' followed by Download Games, then right-click the downloaded ZIP file and choose Extract All (see screenshot 1) to expand the contents, then select a destination folder for the extracted files 2. Finally, double-click the 'Windows7Games_for_Windows_11_10_8.exe' file and follow the instructions to select and install your favourite games.



...then choose where you want to save your extracted files to

Q: How can I connect my PC to my router wirelessly?

A: Issue 690, page 65 – find it on our 2024 Back Issue CD

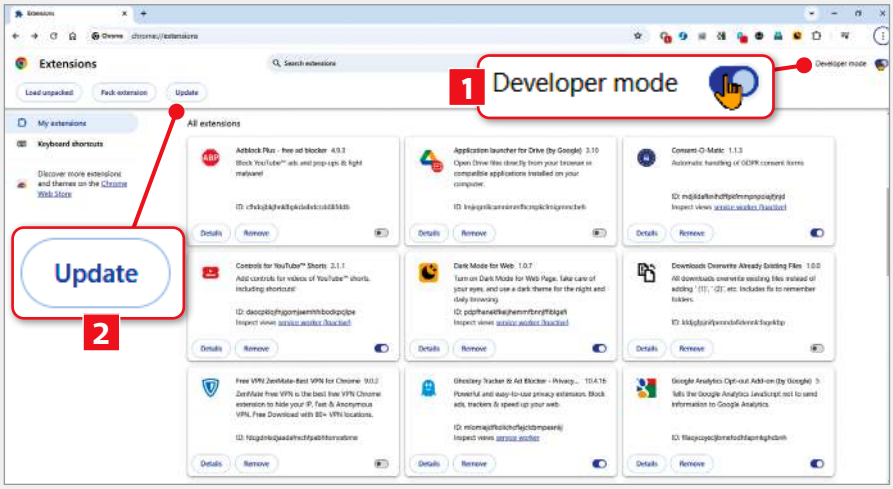
Buy it from www.snipca.com/53179

How do I update browser extensions?

Q You regularly talk about the importance of keeping Windows and programs up to date, and I generally follow your advice. I say 'generally' because, where possible, I tend to hold off for a week or two, just to see if the latest updates cause problems for others. Do you think that's a good idea, or am I putting myself at risk by waiting?

That aside, I recently had one of those random middle-of-the-night thoughts: do I need to update the extensions I've added to Chrome? I use only a handful, but most aren't made by Google.

Douglas North



Switch on 'Developer mode' in Chrome's Manage Extensions window to update manually

A Our answer to your first question is that, generally, waiting a little before performing updates isn't a bad idea, and for precisely the reason you state. However, if an update is marked as 'critical' (or similar), you should act on it as soon as possible. Not applying an urgent Windows fix, for example, could leave your PC at serious risk.

The second question is one we don't think anyone has asked us before, and it's certainly interesting. The answer is that there's no need to worry about extension updates, because Chrome handles them automatically. When the browser is open, it checks every few hours to see if any extensions have updates pending, and applies them in the background.

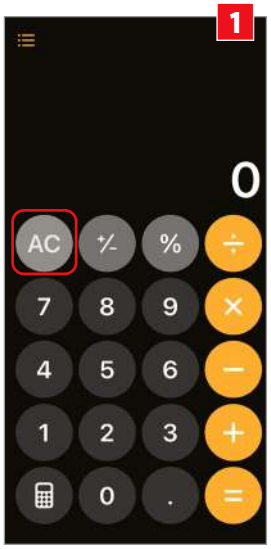
If you want to chivvy it along, you can force it to check manually at any time. First, open the Chrome menu (three dots, top right) then click Extensions followed by Manage Extensions. Next, at the top right, click to flip the 'Developer mode' slider to its on position (1 in our screenshot). Finally, near the top left, click the Update button 2.

Where's All Clear button gone on my Calculator app?

Q Perhaps I'm going mad but the Calculator app on my Apple iPhone seems to have lost its All Clear (AC) button. To be more precise, the AC button is there at first (see screenshot 1), but disappears when I type a number. Instead, it's replaced by an arrow with a cross in the middle 2, which works like the Backspace key on my PC's keyboard.

I find this infuriating. I assume this happened when I updated my phone recently, but I don't understand why anyone would want this. Is there any way to get the AC button back?

Ed Brooks



Apple's calculator app has the familiar AC button when you open it

The AC button turns into a backspace key as soon as you type a number

A You're not going mad – this is a change Apple made through an iOS update. You'd have to ask the company why it felt the need to change this very common and familiar layout. However, we suppose it might argue that a Backspace key gives you more control over what you're deleting, because you can remove one digit at a time rather than all of them. This backspace feature isn't new, but in the past you used it by swiping the screen.

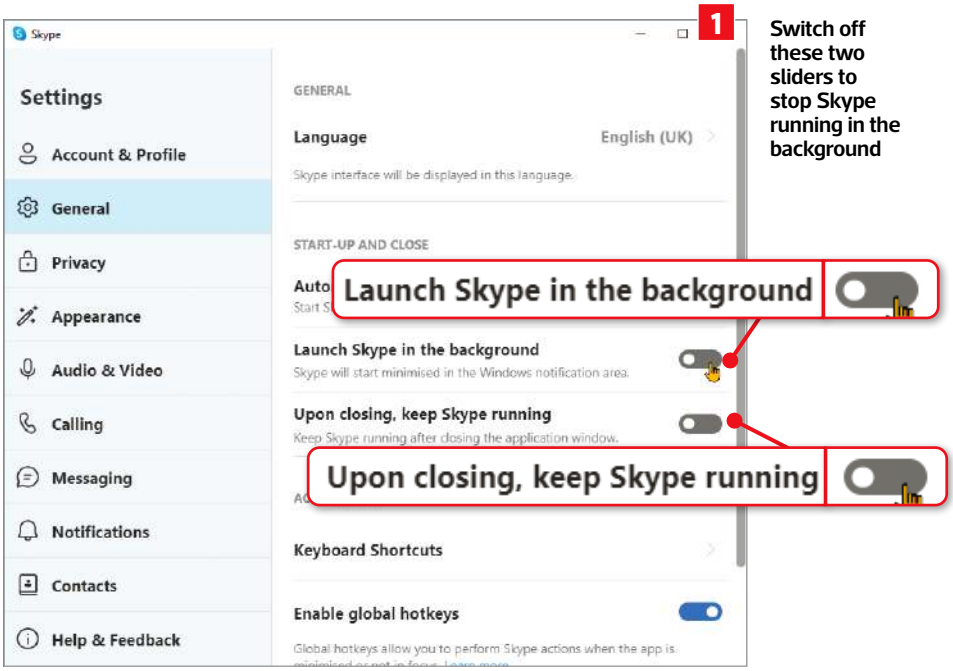
The bad news is that only Apple can change the behaviour of the iPhone's built-in Calculator app, and for now, it seems to have decided that a disappearing AC button is the best way forward. Thankfully, you can still perform the All Clear function by long-pressing the new Backspace-style button. Yes, it takes a moment longer, but it's better than having no AC button at all.

Why does Skype keep popping up on my PC screen?

Q I had to reinstall Microsoft Office recently after some files became corrupted. This was successfully done, but now I'm plagued by a 'Skype for Business' pop-up. I've never installed Skype on my computer and it's not listed in my installed programs, and yet it pops up every time I launch Windows. I can close it by clicking the cross in the corner of its window, but it's a temporary reprieve. When I searched my C drive, I found references to Skype, but I can't delete the files.

I love your magazine, incidentally – it's my favourite fortnightly read.

Ken Knight

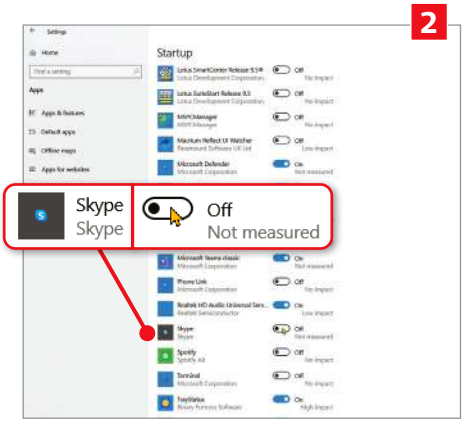


Switch off these two sliders to stop Skype running in the background

A Skype for Business is actually part of Office Professional Plus, which as we can see from the screenshots you sent us, is installed on your system. Microsoft has seemingly worked hard to make Skype one of its most hated programs by making it behave in the way you describe.

There are several things you must do to stop this annoying program appearing at every opportunity. First, while logged into Skype, click the menu button (three dots, top left), then Settings. Next, click to select the General tab and then, in the right-hand pane under 'Start Up and Close', click both sliders to their Off position (see screenshot 1). Now click the Settings button on the same screen. This will open the Startup page in Windows settings 2, where you can switch the Skype slider to Off.

Finally, back in Skype, click the menu button again and choose 'Sign out', then confirm by clicking 'Sign out' once more. Finally, right-click the Skype icon in the notification area at the far right of the taskbar and choose Quit Skype.



Open Windows' Startup settings and switch off Skype to stop it opening automatically

Did mistreatment break my USB cables?

Q For several years I've left a USB cable attached to a power extension that includes USB sockets. Similarly, in my car I leave a USB lead attached to an adapter that sits in the 12V (cigarette lighter) outlet. Recently, both leads failed in the same month and will no longer charge my mobile phone or other items.

Is it a mistake to leave USB cables permanently attached in this way?

Chris Witts

A There's a theoretical answer and a real-world one. In theory, leaving USB cables permanently attached could expose them to unstable voltages that might, over time, shorten their lives. Additional factors might apply in a car, such as fluctuating temperatures and humidity levels. The best practice is to detach cables between use and store them somewhere cool and dry.

In the real world, however, these are not particularly serious problems. Buying high-quality braided cables such as the pictured Anker examples (starting at £8 for two, www.snipca.com/53076) might extend life a little, but getting several years' of use from a couple of USB cables you use regularly is more or less what we'd expect.

That both cables failed within a month of each other is likely to be nothing more than coincidence.

Even high-quality cables such as Anker's have a lifespan of a few years' regular use

WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN...

AirTags and Tiles?

Q I've been thinking about buying some electronic trackers, such as AirTags or Tiles, to put in our holiday luggage.

Last year, one of our suitcases went missing during a flight, and although it eventually turned up some weeks later, it was frustrating – and I was curious to know where it had gone.

I have an iPhone, so I suspect AirTags are the best choice for me, but I'm wondering if there are any advantages to buying Tile tags instead.

Also, is it actually fine to put these things in my luggage? I assume it must be allowed, otherwise airlines would warn us against doing so.

Greg Peel

Tiles come in various designs for different uses, and work with iOS and Android phones

A The simple answer is that AirTags (pictured right) are best for owners of Apple devices, while Tile is best for anyone else. That's because AirTags were designed by Apple for use with its own Find My network and Find My app, which is available only for iPhones, iPads and other Apple products.

AirTags work only with Apple devices but have a global reach

AirTags connect to Apple's vast 'ecosystem' of devices. You can't use AirTags with an Android device, though newer Android phones will alert users if they detect an unknown AirTag (or other tracker) travelling in their vicinity. This is a basic safety feature enabled by both Apple and Google to guard against people using them for nefarious purposes, such as stalking.

In contrast, Tiles are not tied to Apple's or any other manufacturer's products and have their own apps for Android and iOS devices. Unlike AirTags (at least at the moment), Tile products are available in various designs (pictured left) for different uses, such as attaching to keys, luggage and wallets. The basic location functionality is much the same, though.

We should also say that, globally, the Tile Network is smaller than Apple Find My, simply because so many more people own and carry iPhones than devices that have the Tile app installed. So broadly speaking, it's easier to find a lost AirTag than a wayward Tile.

As for using trackers in your luggage, it's perfectly fine. Both AirTag and Tile use Bluetooth Low Energy (LE), which has no impact on flight safety.

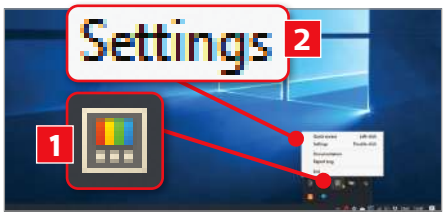
Want to know the difference between technical terms? Email noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

What's File Locksmith on my right-click menu?

Q Recently, I was right-clicking a folder to pin it to my Start menu when I spotted something called File Locksmith on the menu. I hadn't noticed this before, so I suspect it's a recent addition.

Is this a new feature Microsoft has added to Windows? Or is it something I should be worried about? Needless to say I didn't click it, but it's there every time I right-click anything.

Barry Simmons



To deactivate PowerToys tools, click this icon in the Notification Area and select Settings

A This is a Microsoft addition of sorts, but it's not something the company has added to Windows. It's part of the company's popular PowerToys suite of free tools. Either you or someone who uses your computer has installed it, which is why this option – and possibly one or two others – now appears in your right-click menus.

We've covered PowerToys many times over the years, so it's possible that at some point you followed our suggestion to install it and have since forgotten about it. Or perhaps you installed PowerToys for some other feature and were simply unaware of File Locksmith's existence.

If selected, this option shows which processes are using the current file or folder, so you can find out what might be 'locking' something you're trying to move or delete, for example.

In other words, it's perfectly safe and nothing to worry about. If you have no use for it, however, you can hide it from the right-click menu. To do this, first right-click the PowerToys icon in the notification area of the taskbar (1 in our screenshot), then choose Settings 2. Next, click File Locksmith, look for the option to Enable File Locksmith, then click to switch the option to its Off position.

Next Issue

ON SALE Weds 29 Jan

- Why can't I watch live TV on my Fire Stick?
- Can I continue to safely use my old PC?
- How do I get multi-room TV? ...And many more

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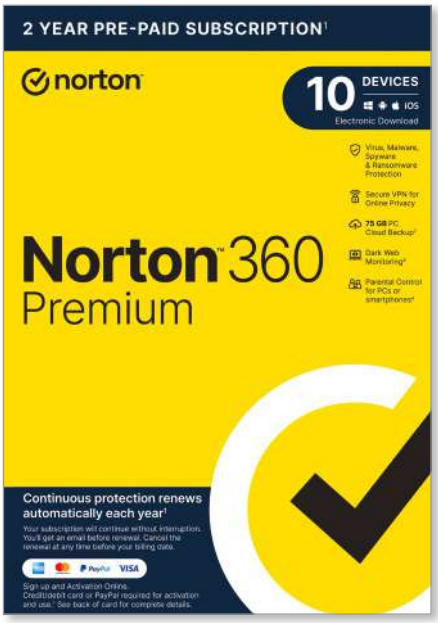

Norton is made by NortonLifeLock Inc – a standalone company dedicated to consumer cyber safety. It has always performed strongly in *Computeractive* antivirus tests, so we highly recommend it.

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Reader Support

Having a problem with our recommended software or expert tips? Email **editor@computeractive.co.uk** and we'll do our best to help

Why can't I add my Yahoo account to Thunderbird?

Q I took your advice and downloaded Thunderbird for mobile (Issue 698, page 55) because I already use Thunderbird with my Yahoo email account on my desktop PC. While setting it up on my phone, however, I tried to log in but received the message 'Oauth 2.0 is currently not supported with this provider'. I have no idea what this means. Can you help?

Paul Cumbleton

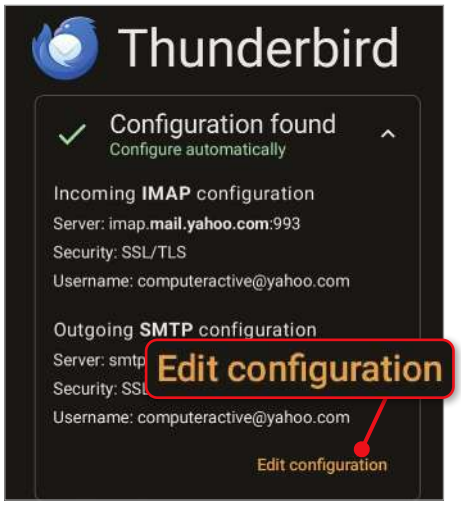
A You may receive this message if you're trying to configure your Yahoo email as a POP3 account in the Thunderbird mobile app. Have you tried setting up your Yahoo account as an IMAP email instead? According to the app's developers (www.snipca.com/53160), this could solve your problem.

Make sure you have the latest version of the Thunderbird app installed. Begin setting up your account as before, entering your email address when prompted, then tap the down arrow next to 'Configuration found' and tap 'Edit configuration' (see screenshot below). On the 'Incoming mail server screen', enter the details below:

Protocol: IMAP
Server: imap.mail.yahoo.com
Security: SSL/TLS
Port: 993
Authentication: OAuth 2.0
Username: your yahoo email address

Leave all the other settings as they are and tap Next. The app will ask you to sign in using your Yahoo account credentials. Do this, then continue with the steps until you get to the 'Outgoing server settings' screen, then enter the details below. Finally, tap Next and follow the remaining steps to complete the process.

Server: smtp.mail.yahoo.com
Security: SSL/TLS
Port: 465
Authentication: OAuth 2.0
Username: your yahoo email address



Tap 'Edit configuration' to set up your Yahoo account using IMAP in Thunderbird mobile

Why didn't you recommend buying Office 2024?

Q Your answer to Chris Maiden's question in Issue 698, page 67 ('How do I make Office 2013 work with Windows 11?') suggested the 'nuclear option' of uninstalling and reinstalling Office. This will only work if he has the original installation media and a licence that lets him install on another PC. I'm surprised you didn't suggest buying Office 2024 Home (assuming he only needs Word, Excel and PowerPoint). If he has managed with Office 2013 until now, 2024 should last him just as long.

Ian Thow

A You're correct. To uninstall and reinstall Office 2013 you would need the original installation media (CDs or DVDs), along with a disc drive to install them and the original licence number to activate the product. We should have pointed this out in our original response to Chris Maiden's question.

Office 2024 Home is a better option than sticking with Office 2013 – you can buy it for £109.99 from the *Computeractive* store

We also agree that switching to Office 2024 Home would be a better option, particularly as Microsoft no longer supports Office 2013 with updates and patches, making it a security risk. On the *Computeractive* store, Office 2024 Home currently costs just £109.99 (www.snipca.com/52838, pictured above) – £10 off the official price.

Are eSIMs restricted to just one device?

Q When I upgraded my phone recently, I was asked if I wanted to switch to an eSIM, so I was eager to read your feature on the subject in Issue 697 (page 62). I opted against it because sometimes I switch the physical SIM in my phone to my iPad and my mobile router while travelling in our campervan. As I understand it, an eSIM is limited to one device. Can you confirm this? I don't think the article pointed this out.

Stephen Knight

A As far as we're aware, sharing eSIMs between devices isn't currently possible in the UK. We mentioned in the article that you can transfer an eSIM from one device to another, but that's usually only when upgrading from an old phone and is part of the initial setup for the new device. In your case, we'd suggest sticking with a physical SIM card, because you can continue to use it between devices.

Jargon Buster

4K Video with a resolution of at least 3840x2160 pixels.

7z A format for compressing files into an archive format.

8K Video with a resolution of 7680x4320 pixels. Currently the highest resolution available.

Administrator Someone who can make changes to a computer that will affect others who also use it.

AES-256bit Advanced Encryption Standard. A form of encryption based on a key length of 256 bits.

AR Augmented reality. Lets you view the real world on a screen and add virtual elements.

ASHA American Speech-Language-Hearing Association.

Bandwidth A measure of how much data can be transferred through a connection at one time.

Beamforming A technique for microphones to pick up on specific sources of sound and reduce background noise.

Benchmarking Comparing software and products with an accepted standard.

BIN Compressed binary files, typically CD and DVD backup image files.

BitLocker Security feature in Windows 10 and 11 Pro that encrypts drives. You need a password to unlock them.

Blue screen of death Technically called a 'Stop error', this is shown when your PC crashes.

Bluetooth Low Energy A type of Bluetooth technology designed to consume less power while not sacrificing signal strength.

Botnet A group of infected computers connected together via the internet, and used to infect other PCs, send junk email and perform other criminal tasks.

Brute-force attack A method of breaking encryption by simply guessing all possible passwords until the right one is found.

C/C++ Code that developers use to simplify programming tasks.

Cache A temporary space for storing information. Can be memory used on a computer processor, or space on a hard drive used by a web browser.

cd/m² Candela per square metre. Standard unit of brightness.

Clean install An operating system installation that overwrites all other content on the hard drive.

Clone A feature found in some backup programs that makes an exact copy of a drive on to another drive.

Cookie A small text file stored on your computer by a website. Used to store browsing preferences, website log-in details and so on.

Copilot+ An enhanced version of Microsoft's Copilot AI tool. Also used to classify Windows 11 computers with a neural processing unit (NPU) that can perform over 40 trillion operations per second (TOPS).

Core Units on a processor that carry out program instructions.

CR2032 Small, round cell battery used in many devices, including watches, calculators and LEDs.

Cryptocurrency A digital currency not backed by any country. The most popular is Bitcoin.

Dark mode Showing white text on a black background.

DCI-P3 A colour space that has a wider spectrum than sRGB.

DNS Domain Name System. A technology that associates computers with their addresses on the internet.

dpi Dots per inch. A measure of printed image quality, or the size an object will be shown on screen.

Domain These are used to identify one or more IP addresses.

Efficiency core Processors used for background tasks that run constantly but don't require much processing power.

EPUB A file format used by many popular ebook readers.

eSIM A virtual SIM card that's built into a phone, making it easier to change network.

Ethernet A standard used for almost all wired computer networks.

Exchange server Microsoft's business system for managing emails, calendars, contacts and tasks.

File path Shows the location of a file within Windows.

Firmware Basic software stored on hardware, such as a processor, to control its operation.

Flash storage A data-storage device that includes flash memory with an integrated USB interface.

Full HD Resolution of 1920x1080 pixels.

Geo-restricted Content such as TV programmes and films that's intended to be watched only in a specific country. Much US-made content can't be legally watched outside the US, for example.

GHz Gigahertz. A measure of how many instructions a chip can process per second. 1GHz is equal to 1,000MHz.

Gigabit Ethernet A very fast networking standard that can transfer data at up to 1,000Mbps.

HDMI High-definition media interface. A type of connection that transmits high-definition video and audio signals.

Hotspot A public area covered by a Wi-Fi network that allows you to access the internet, either free or for a fee.

IMAP Internet Message Access Protocol. A method for email that lets the user manage messages stored on a remote server.

IP67 International Protection marking. The '6' denotes that a device is resistant to dust, general dirt and sand. The '7' indicates that it can be placed underwater for 30 minutes at depths of up to 1m.

Latency A measure of the delay in exchanging data between devices and web servers and on networks.

LED Light-emitting diode. An electronic device that emits light. Used on almost all electronic devices, and to provide the backlight for some LCDs.

M.2 A standard specification for internal PC expansion cards and connectors.

Mesh Wi-Fi Wireless network system that uses multiple, connected routers to stretch Wi-Fi further than a traditional router.

MicroSD card A small type of memory card. Can be converted to SD size using an adapter.

MicroUSB A miniature version of USB, often found on smartphones, tablets and portable hard drives.

Nanocarbon Carbon-based materials with structures at the nanoscale, typically ranging from 1 to 100 nanometres (billionths of a metre).

NAS Network-attached storage. A hard drive attached to a network that can be shared with other PCs.

NFC Near-field communication. A technology that allows two devices to communicate by being touched together or placed near to each other.

OLED Organic light-emitting diode. A thin-film organic light-emitting diode used in computer displays and television screens.

Open source Software that can be modified by anyone, rather than just by the employees of the company that created it.

Package manager A program that helps automate the process of installing, updating, configuring, and removing software packages.

Performance core Processors designed for heavy-duty computer work.

POP3 Post Office Protocol 3. A system for remotely accessing and retrieving email from an ISP. Most email programs and ISPs use POP3.

Port forwarding Choosing which computer in your network a router should connect to.

PowerShell A Windows tool for automating commands.

Protocol (VPN) Set of rules that define how data is sent over a VPN.

QR code Quick Response code. A barcode that can be read using smartphones.

RAM Random-access memory. The computer's working area, used for data storage while the PC is switched on.

RAR Roshal Archive. A format for storing compressed files.

Read To access data saved on a computer.

Refurbished A second-hand device that has been repaired by its manufacturer so that it can be resold and reused.

SSD Solid-state drive. Storage that, unlike a hard drive, uses no moving parts.

Static IP address An IP address that stays the same every time you go online, unlike dynamic IP addresses.

Subwoofer A special type of speaker designed to reproduce deep bass sounds only. Even on a stereo system, only one subwoofer is required because human ears cannot detect the direction of bass frequencies.

Thunderbolt A very fast port for connecting external storage to a computer. Can be used to connect monitors, a network and more.

TPM Trusted Platform Module. A computer chip that stores keys which encrypt data on your hard drive.

Transition A way of joining two video clips together or moving from one clip to another.

USB 2.0/3.0/3.1/3.2 Faster successors to USB.

USB-C A new connector that's reversible, letting you plug it in upside down.

Vector Graphics that are rendered as smooth lines so they can be enlarged to any scale without a loss of quality.

VESA Video Electronics Standards Association. A standard mount for attaching monitors on to stands, walls and PCs.

VGA Video Graphics Array. An older standard socket for connecting a monitor to a PC.

VPN Virtual private network. Keeps all internet communication safe and private.

VR Virtual reality. Computer-generated simulation of a three-dimensional object or environment that you can interact with by wearing a headset.

Whitelist A list of allowed websites, email addresses and applications used by security software to ensure you only visit safe websites and download safe programs.

Widget A small program such as a calendar that runs on the Windows desktop.

Wi-Fi 7 Faster successor to Wi-Fi 6, with an estimated maximum speed of around 46Gbps.

WPS Wifi Protected Setup. An easy way to make a wireless connection between a device and your router by pressing the WPS button on both.

Write Save data to a hard drive.

Zero-day vulnerability A previously unknown software flaw that can be exploited by malware or hackers before it's fixed.

ZIP file A file that contains compressed documents or files.

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Broadband GENIE

Broadband Genie's helpline is powered by Comparison Tech (part of UK Web Media).

Easy when you

Know How

Hoping his accounts are secured with something stronger than '123456', **Robert Irvine** tries to...

Crack his own passwords

One of my favourite annual traditions is the round-up of the most commonly used (and therefore weakest) passwords. Although this list always contains the same predictable entries, I'm still curious to see if there are any new trends.

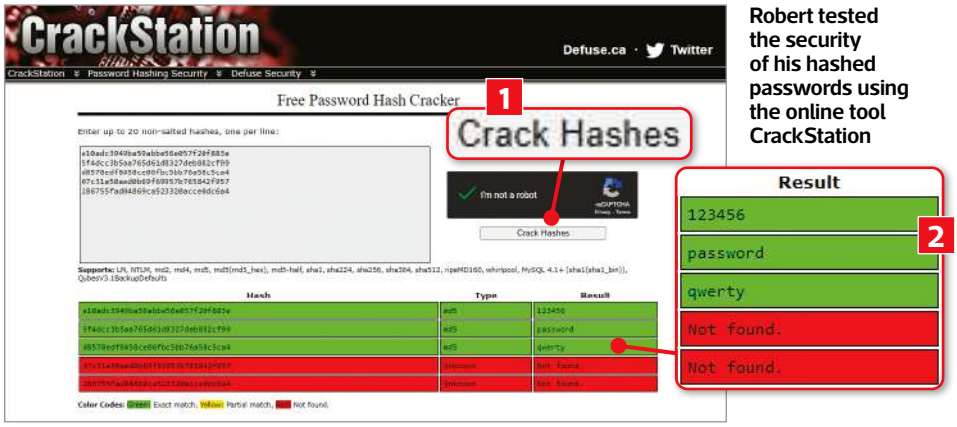
According to password manager NordPass, which compiled the top 200 most used passwords of 2024 (www.snipca.com/53257), UK web users remain most partial to 'qwerty', '123456' and of course 'password'. The top of the global list is much the same, though further down I spotted quirkier logins such as 'aaaaaaaa', 'superman' and 'princess'.

NordPass also provides details of how long these passwords would take to crack, typically less than one second. One notable exception is 'tinkle', which would apparently foil hackers for up to two minutes – enough time for them to go for one.

This made me wonder how long my own passwords would withstand an attempt to crack them if they were stolen or leaked in a data breach. Websites and apps are supposed to encrypt our passwords and save the scrambled results as 'hashes', but unless those passwords are 'salted' – by adding random data before they're hashed – hackers can use decryption tools to crack them. Such is my understanding, anyway – all that hashing and salting makes me think of corned beef.

To discover how secure my passwords are, I first tested them using Bitwarden's Password Strength Testing Tool (www.snipca.com/53258). Unsurprisingly, most passwords from the NordPass list were deemed 'very weak' and confirmed to take less than a second to crack – again, 'tinkle' took longer.

I then tried my Gmail password, which combines two words, a number and a punctuation mark. Bitwarden told me this was 'good' and would take 10 days to crack. Not bad! Finally, I pasted a password I'd generated using Bitwarden's own generator – a long mix of upper- and lower-case letters, numbers and special characters that I'd have no hope of remembering myself. This was praised as 'strong' with an estimated crack time of centuries.



Robert tested the security of his hashed passwords using the online tool CrackStation

> All that hashing and salting makes me think of corned beef

Reassured by these results, I now put on my white hat (www.snipca.com/53259) and approached the cracking process like a real hacker. I pasted my test passwords into the online tool MD5 Encrypt/Decrypt (www.snipca.com/53260), which hashed them using the MD5 algorithm favoured by many websites. I then copied the (unsalted) hashes into Notepad and saved them as a text file.

Next, I tried using the free password cracker Hashcat (www.snipca.com/53261) to test whether my hashed passwords could be cracked. The name made it sound like a cute kitty, but the reality was very different. Hashcat involves downloading a 7z archive containing binary files, extracting its contents and copying a huge list of leaked logins into its folder – along with your hashed passwords.

You then run Hashcat in PowerShell using complicated commands, and... well, that's as far as I got. Following a series of baffling red error messages, Hashcat crashed my PC and triggered the dreaded Blue screen of death. Me-ow!

After I restarted, I tried the simpler and safer option of using an online tool to test my passwords. The best I found had the unfortunate name CrackStation (www.snipca.com/53262), but thankfully it was much friendlier than Hashcat. It compares your unsalted hashes against those in its enormous (15-billion entry) database, to try and extract the encrypted passwords.

I pasted the hashes from the text file into CrackStation, ticked 'I'm not a robot' and clicked Crack Hashes (1 in our screenshot). The tool instantly decrypted the three passwords from the NordPass list, but the more complex ones I'd created myself were 'Not found' and therefore uncracked 2.

That doesn't mean they're completely secure, as their hashes may have been exposed in recent breaches – CrackStation's homepage worryingly says: 'Last modified: May 2019', though I'm sure its methodology is still sound. At least I'm confident they won't appear on this year's naughty-password list.

Need help with your passwords? Let us know: noproblem@computeractive.co.uk

Next issue: Robert tries to spring-clean his PC with Bloatynosy